WILLIAM SOMERSET MAUGHAM

NOVELIST AND STORY-TELLER

A STUDY

BY

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FOREWORD

Somerset Maugham has been estimated here mainly as a novelist and story-teller; it is there that we get the real author who has not to think of the mentality of the audience. One or two of his plays, however, have been mentioned incidentally.

The author regrets that he could not take Maugham's latest novel, *Christmas Holiday* (1939), into consideration, as this thesis was completed before that book was available in Calcutta. In this thesis *Theatre* (1937) has been regarded as Maugham's latest novel.

The author takes this opportunity of thanking Messrs. A. K. Sen, T. N. Sen and S. C. Sen, Lecturers of the English Department for their valuable suggessions, and Mr. G. N. Ghose for kindly going through the proofs.

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NITISH KUMAR BASU

CHAPTER I

Popularity and the Intelligentsia

It is admittedly a difficult task to pronounce any opinion on an author who does not belong to one's own country. It is only natural for us to look out for the light coming from the compatriots of the author. We recognise a saint by his aureole. We are afraid in fact of passing an independent judgment. No wonder that there are people who take Maugham to be only a writer of pot-boilers. They judge him from the prevailing critical attitude towards him in England, which is not very flattering. The critics have not made disparaging remarks about him ; they have done what is worse, they have ignored him. In a big volume of the history of English literature, if Maugham is noticed at all, he does not get more than a few lines.

It is not that he has no popularity ; indeed there can be no question about his popularity. His latest novel *Theatre* (1937) was reprinted thrice in one year. Five of his plays were simultaneously represented on the stage

in London in 1907. " I saw the lot, " says Sir John Squire, " and often wonder why that most ingenious and roaring funny play, *Jack Straw*, is never revived." [1] And Sir John Squire echoes what the British public thinks of Maugham's plays. But unfortunately Maugham lost by his popularity .the good opinion of the intelligentsia. " I have no illusion about my literary position, " said Maugham in 1938, " there are but two important critics in England who have taken me seriously." [2]

The attitude of the critics however is variable ; at one time the theory of art for art held sway and the critics accepted it as the basis of their literary appraisement. But the critical view has since changed and the critics mostly now follow the doctrine of Bernard Shaw, that " the man, who says art for art's sake, is a fool." Maugham thinks that it is from this point of view that the intelligentsia look down upon the popular plays he has written. Maugham had certainly catered to the public " who wanted to laugh or enjoy a theme of love, or to feel for death and be awed by the destiny of man." Maugham's defence of his materials and methods is worth consideration. " If I had continued to write plays as bitter as *A Man of Honour* or as sardonic as *Loaves and Fishes*, I should never have been given the opportunity of producing certain pieces to which not even the most severe have refused praise." [3] But the impression once produced is very difficult to remove. It is very unfortunate, since this has also prevented the critics from looking into Maugham's novels seriously.

Maugham's remarks on this attitude of the critics may seem a little pungent but they are nevertheless very shrewd :

> The elect sneers at popularity. They are inclined even to assert that it is a proof of mediocrity ; but they forget that posterity makes its choice

[1] *Illustrated London News*, Feb., 12, 1938
[2] *The Summing Up.*
[3] *Ibid.*

not from among the unknown writers of a period, but from the known..... It may be that posterity may scrap all the best-sellers of our day, but it is among them that it must choose. [1]

It is only in the distant future that the verdict of the people and that of the intelligentsia meet. It reminds one of the mathematical truth of parallel straight lines meeting at infinity. It is a notorious truth; contemporary verdicts of the people and of 'the elect' are seldom the same.

It is not very difficult for us to guess why Maugham is not held in very high esteem by the English critics. Maugham suggests delicately that the reason lies in the lack of the spirit of propaganda in his work. [2] He does not go much deeper than this. The real reason however lies elsewhere. It will be a mistake to think that the English critics of to-day ignore all writers who are not propagandists. There are writers who are not propagandists and yet are not ignored. When we go deeply into the cause of their popularity with the intelligentsia we cannot but suspect that generally it is something novel, something very striking and bold either in form or in contents that claims the attention of the critics. It is only natural to be more easily attracted by a bold colour than by a mild one. When the critics praise James Joyce or Virginia Woolf, they do that because they are awed by the immense daring of their experiments. The boldness of D. H. Lawrence forces their eyes on to him. It is some dazzling colour or other that marks them out from their contemporaries, which attracts the critics and makes them appreciate their genius in other respects. Somerset Maugham has no such distinguishing colour. He has not attempted any innovation in form. He has not drawn the critics' attention to the psychological subtleties in his work by displaying a bold indecency like that in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. He has not even

[1] *Cakes and Ale.*

[2] *The Summing Up.*

the spirit of propaganda which is the easiest means now of attracting the attention of the critics. Maugham has no doubt pointed out some inherent diseases of society but on account of his peculiar philosophy, (as we shall see later,) he has not been able to make such propaganda his only aim, as Bernard Shaw has done. He takes life to be a " painted veil " and for him to set about earnestly to reform society, is ridiculous. We shall see later that the reformer is not altogether absent from his novels and short stories but that is so hidden under his fascinating power of story-telling that the critics, used to the blunt cudgelling of Bernard Shaw and his school, fail to take that seriously.

The fact remains that very few critics believe that Maugham will be remembered, say, fifty years hence, or that he will try against the big names of the day " the question with the posterity. " But one should not be surprised if the laurel be placed on his head by a discerning posterity. Maugham does not show an unjustified vanity when he issues the challenge :

> The history of criticism is there to show that contemporary criticism is fallible.
>
> —*The Summing Up.*

CHAPTER II

The Soil and the Seed

In the year 1884, at the age of ten, Somerset Maugham came to settle in England and be educated like an English boy. His father, perhaps "drawn by some such restlessness for the unknown as has consumed his son, went to Paris and became solicitor to the British Embassy."[1] His mother was a beautiful woman, he informs us, and his parents were known as "Beauty and the Beast" in the Paris of that time. She was probably a woman of character and perhaps she had some talent; she wrote some novels in French and composed the music for some drawing room ballads. When Maugham lost both of them—his mother at eight and his father at ten—he came to England and his uncle and guardian, the Vicar of Whitstable, sent him to a preparatory school, an annexe of the King's school. "I have never forgotten the roar of laughter that abashed me when in my preparatory school I read out the phrase 'unstable as water' as though unstable rhymed with Dunstable,"[2] he says. The fact was that he was educated as a French boy. In Paris he had a French nurse and had been to a French school. French became practically his mother tongue; he refers in his autobiography to an incident of his childhood; seeing a horse out of a railway window, he had cried out in French. After he had been taken away from the French school, he used to have lessons under a clergyman at the church attached to the Embassy. But he was not taught seriously and systematically. Moreover, it was not for long.

[1] *The Summing Up.*

[2] *Ibid.*

For a time Maugham liked the King's school to which he went after the preparatory school. But that was not for long and he persuaded his uncle to let him go to Germany and learn German. After a year or so he returned from Germany and as he was not very keen to be subjected once more to discipline in Cambridge it was decided that he should take up the medical profession. And he entered St. Thomas' Hospital in the autumn of 1892.

Maugham must have inherited his artistic sense from his mother. His grandfather from his father's side was indeed the author of many volumes of law books, but then it is very difficult to find an artistic sense in such dry productions. In the medical school, we see for the first time this seed germinating. He found the first two years of the curriculum very dull and gave his work " no more attention than was necessary to scrape through the examinations." [1] In his spare time, he began to fill his notebooks with " ideas for stories and plays, scraps of dialogue and reflections on what my reading and the various experiences that I was undergoing suggested to me." [2]

That dull period of the curriculum over, he began to find interest in his work. He had to attend to a number of confinements to get a certificate and for that he had to go into the slums of Lambeth. It was one of the most important periods of his life. " For here I was in contact with..... life in the raw. In those three years I must have witnessed pretty well every emotion of which man is capable. It appealed to my dramatic instinct. It excited the novelist in me. Even now that forty years have passed I can remember certain people so exactly that I could draw a picture of them. Phrases that I heard then still linger on my ears. I saw how men died. I saw how they bore pain. I saw what hope looked like, fear and relief; I saw the dark lines that despair drew

[1] *The Summing Up.*
[2] *Ibid.*

on a face; I saw courage and steadfastness. I saw faith shine in the eyes of those who trusted in what I could only think was an illusion and I saw the gallantry that made a man greet the prognosis of death with an ironic joke because he was too proud to let those about him see the terror of his soul." [1] This experience was the foundation on which he built up his career as a writer, as a painter of life and character.

Liza of Lambeth (1897) was his first novel. He had written two stories and had sent them to Fisher Unwin. After some time Unwin returned them but he asked Maugham whether he had not a novel to publish. This encouraged Maugham and utilising the spare time he had (he still had to work in the Hospital all day), he wrote his first novel. It was entirely based on the incidents that he saw when he was an Obstetric Clerk. The field for that novel was well-prepared. Arthur Morrison with his *Tales of Mean Street* and *A Child of the Jago* had drawn the attention of the public to the slums and Maugham got the full benefit of the new interest created in the subject. The book was a success and the eyes of the intelligentsia were turned to the new star arising. Fisher Unwin pressed him for another bigger novel based on the slums. If Maugham had taken his advice, he would have been regarded as a slum novelist and nothing more. He could not have perhaps risen above the narrow bounds of that. But he was ambitious and sent to his publisher a novel of an entirely different type. It was a novel written in accordance with an advice given by Andrew Lang that a young author without much experience of life should try his hand at historical fiction. *The Making of a Saint* (1898) was set in the Italy of the Renaissance period.

He was gathering experience. And whenever he had opportunity he travelled on the Continent. It was in Italy that he first tried his hand at play-writing. But his first

[1] *The Summing Up.*

full-length play (not considering the curtain-raisers) he wrote when he had already published the two novels mentioned. It was *The Man of Honour* (1898). But no manager accepted it and after a considerable time he rewrote it and sent it to the Stage Society which accepted it.

By now he was qualified as a doctor. But he did not try to establish himself as a medical practitioner as was expected; on the contrary he set himself to making a name as a writer. He wrote a number of plays and novels and short stories, none of which however needs mentioning except *Mrs. Craddock* (1902) which had some success. But it was still a green fruit. He was now seriously trying to become a dramatist. He felt that he had genius in that field; but no manager recognised it before 1907. That year he had his first success as a dramatist and it was a spectacular one. He had then five dramas running in London. They were *A Man of Honour*, *Mrs. Dot*, *Lady Frederick*, *Jack Straw*, and *The Explorer*.

Up to the year 1915 we see him mainly as a dramatist. He thought drama to be his medium of expression; he could write the dialogues well; but he says, "when it came to a page of description I found myself entangled in all sorts of quandaries."[1] That does not mean that he had altogether given up his idea to be a novelist. He wrote a few novels, but they were, we may say, merely by way of experiment. It was not till 1915 that we see his emergence as a novel writer. He wrote *Of Human Bondage*, which is to some extent autobiographical.

The War came and it provided Maugham with fresh experiences. He first joined a unit of ambulance cars and afterwards he was transferred to the Intelligence Department. It was quite an interesting life, though not as thrilling as is represented in detective novels, and it gave him the themes

[1] *The Summing Up.*

for his detective stories which he wrote in the twenties of this century. He was posted in Switzerland. After a year, when his services were no longer required there, he went to America and thence to the South Seas. This journey (which was undertaken apparently for reasons of health but really for the sentimental purpose of seeing the land of which he had dreamt from his boyhood when he read romantic books about the islands) opened a new field before him. He owes to that journey his claim as one of the best English short-story writers.

When he came back he was sent on a mission to Petrograd. He was sent to prevent the Bolsheviks from seizing power. But within three months the Government was overthrown and he returned to England, very ill. At last tuberculosis which had threatened him from his childhood got a hold upon him and he was sent to a sanatorium in the north of Scotland. It was a new experience and he admits that he "learnt a good deal about human nature in that sanatorium" [1] which otherwise he would never have known.

This period of convalescence was the beginning of one of the most fruitful periods of his life. When engaged in arduous activities as an Intelligence Officer in the War he found that play-writing was a "convenient means of distracting attention from the activities he was engaged in." He wrote *Our Betters*, which was the first of a series of 'comedy of manners.' When he had to spend his time in bed, after he had contracted tuberculosis, he found play-writing "a pleasant way of passing the time." [2]

When he recovered from his illness he went to China. This was the last of his long tours. [3] After that he settled down and began to utilise his experiences. He wrote short stories and novels based on the experiences gathered from

[1] *The Summing Up.*

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] He visited India in 1938 but it is not yet known if he has made any use of the experiences gathered from that tour.

the travels. He was now a mature writer and he wrote plays, novels and short stories with equal aptitude. It is no use going into his life any further. A writer usually bases his book mainly on his experiences and we have already dealt in brief with the experiences which he afterwards utilised.

CHAPTER III

Influences at Work

I

Of Masters

Mr. Desmond McCarthy has described Maugham as "the English Maupassant" and of course as a striking label it sounds as good as any other; but like all such compact judgments, this fails to give the proper impression; it is truth but not the whole truth. Maugham himself admits that he was very fond of Maupassant and had finished all his works before he was eighteen. "It is natural enough," he says, "that when at that age I began writing stories myself I should unconsciously have chosen these little masterpieces as a model. I might very well have hit upon a worse."[1] Maupassant in fact served as a ladder; he served as a model to the apprentice; but to label the mature writer Maugham as the English Maupassant is an injustice though a well-meaning one.

The genius of Maupassant lies in his captivating power of story-telling. The stories, say, *Boule de Suif*, *L'Heritage* or *La Parure*, need no power of narration to make them interesting. This merit of Maupassant naturally attracted Maugham and was perhaps a factor in forming his taste for the story interest. For all we know, he might have had an inclination for that irrespective of Maupassant's influence; what Maupassant did, was to strengthen that inclination. Maugham likes to tell a story with a beginning, a middle and an end, just like Maupassant, and that is the only ground in common between the two.

[1] Preface, *Altogether*.

There is another fact that at first seems to point to the influence of Maupassant on Maugham; it is the obvious stress laid on the infidelity of women in Maugham's stories. In Maupassant's time infidelity was a thing of fashion, Maupassant in fact could not conceive a character like Neil Macadam,[1] a pure soul with an instinctive horror of infidelity, without a derisive sneer. In Maugham's case it is different. In books like *Mrs. Craddock*, written at the time when we may suppose that he was steeped in Maupassant, we get chaste or rather constant women. When afterwards he becomes obsessed with that idiosyncrasy, we cannot say that Maupassant had anything to do with it—it grew with the growth of his philosophy of life.[2]

Maupassant's influence indeed does not go beyond the taste for story interest. But that at first seems so great a factor that we are apt to overlook the other factors which go to build up a story of Maugham. Maupassant takes much less interest in characters than in plots. He does not generally try to analyse characters. He gives a few broad business like touches, just sufficient to be a peg to hang his story on. With Maugham, however, it is an entirely different story. Maugham's method is to conceive a character first—mostly taking a real person as basis[3]—and then to fit in a plot consistent with the peculiarities of that character; naturally enough his characters are much more deeply sketched than Maupassant's. They are three-dimensional and very convincing whereas Maupassant's characters as characters leave very little impress on the reader's mind; on second thought they are found to be rather unconvincing. Moreover, Maupassant never tries to go beyond what is apparent.

[1] Neil Macadam, *Ah King*.

[2] *Vide* Chapter VII, Section VII.

[3] "I have taken living people and put them into the situations tragic or comic that their characters suggested." (*The Summing Up.*) For details *vide* Chapter IV, Sec. V.

He makes men act but never tries to find out a deeply laid cause of such an action. Maugham tries to find the why and the wherefore. Where he does not impart the sense of the freakishness of fate, he shows some cause of the result in the characters themselves or in the environment. A Philip, to some extent, has to thank, for his miseries, his gentlemanliness and his inner craving for love and affection, a natural trait in an orphan. [1] The cause of the crumbling down of the happy nest built by Doris and Guy lies in the prejudice created in Doris by the environment in which she is brought up. [2] This is done in every one of Maugham's novels, plays or short stories.

Maupassant falls far short of Maugham in his power of character-sketching. In fact none can teach a writer the method of making a character three-dimensional; that power is instinctive and cannot be taught. For that Maugham is not indebted to anybody. But he is greatly indebted to Maupassant for freeing him from the morbid influence of Chekov to which many of Maugham's contemporaries bowed their heads, and guiding his taste in the direction which suited his genius, namely, the creation of story interest.

When Maugham began to write short stories seriously, he found himself at a disadvantage. Chekov had at that time taken hold of the literary world. To admire him had become a sign of good taste. Writers had begun to imitate him; Chekov showed them that they could do without a plot; what they needed to write a story was only a certain captivating manner of writing; he showed them the way of writing a story by only describing the relations between a few persons. No wonder they fell for him. It was taken to be the most natural thing in the world and those like Maugham who did not imitate Chekov were rather out of favour. It was very likely the taste for well-knit plot which Maupassant

1 *Of Human Bondage.*

2 *Force of Circumstance, Altogether.*

helped to form, that prevented Maugham from imitating Chekov.

Maugham has not transported " Russian melancholy, Russian futility, Russian infirmity of purpose to Surrey or Michigan, Brooklyn or Clapham," [1] unlike many writers of his day. Some sort of a sense of futility and melancholy, however, we can find in Maugham's writings. Sometimes we find a sense of man fighting with fate ; Blanche Stroeve tries vainly to ward off the coming danger which she can instinctively feel [2] ; when Philip gets some peace, Fate throws Mildred on his path to mortify him. [3] Harold with the help of his wife Millicent again and again tries to give up the drinking habit but Fate is too strong for him ; some incidents occur, some guests turn up and he has to make them merry, or malaria weakens his body and mind and he again resumes his old habit.[4] There is another Chekovian element in Maugham ; it is the indifference and callousness of the people. Everybody is concerned with his own interest. None cares for other people. When Liza lies dying, all the while funny selfish talk is going on. Mrs. Kemp has the consolation that Liza is insured. The thing that pains Mrs. Kemp is not that her daughter is going to die but that such botheration should happen to her.[5] When Millicent tells the story (being pressed by her parents to tell it) how she came to murder her husband, her father says, " I ought never to have been told, it was most selfish of you " ; even a father cannot sympathise with and share the grief of his daughter.[6] Gallegher's death does not prevent the Christmas Day being celebrated on board the ship ; and it was not long before " Mrs. Linsell and the doctor resumed flirtation " which the strange illness of Gallegher

[1] *The Summing Up.*
[2] *The Moon and Sixpence.*
[3] *Of Human Bondage.*
[4] *Before the Party, Altogether.*
[5] *Liza of Lambeth.*
[6] *Before the Party, Altogether.*

had for a time interrupted.[1] The world is like that and Maugham paints it as it is. But there is a great difference between Maugham and Chekov. The latter always creates an atmosphere of futility and callousness; that is the only side of the world he can see. He was "a sick overworked grey-minded man.....For Chekov life is like a game of billiards in which you never pot the red, bring off a losing hazard or make a cannon, and should you by a miraculous chance get a fluke you will almost certainly cut the cloth." [2] But Maugham's is a healthy mind and he can see the sympathy and joy as well as callousness and suffering. This callousness does not blind his vison; to him callous self-centred people like Mr. Swan [3] or Lady Kitty [4] are mere "cases," they are not the only people in Maugham's world.

It is not quite right to ascribe this sense of futility and callousness to the influence of Chekov. This pessimism has always accompanied a searching intellect. In Chekov this only goes to one extreme. It is most likely that this pessimism in Maugham grew by itself. Even if it is the result of influence from outside, he might have been more beholden to Thomas Hardy than to a Russian whose attitude towards life he does not seem to have always looked upon with favour.

The extent of the influence of Maupassant and Chekov on Maugham is rather uncertain and can be but the subject of speculation. But there are two masters of whose influence on him, small as it is, we can be more certain. They are Ibsen and Oscar Wilde. This influence, however, deserves only a passing mention. It is found only in some of his plays. Ibsen's influence we can see in *The Man of Honour* and nowhere else in an appreciable measure. The influence of Oscar Wilde is of more importance; Maugham's early plays like

1 *P. & O., Altogether.*
2 Preface, *Altogether.*
3 *The Narrow Corner.*
4 *The Circle.*

Lady Frederick, Jack Straw, etc., bear ample traces of the witty and artificial dialogue which Oscar Wilde brought into vogue. His other dramas too like the *The Circle* show slight traces of the same influence.

It is possible to exaggerate the extent of the masters' influence on Maugham ; for, as a matter of fact, Maugham was influenced by the age and his own experiences more than by his masters.

II

Of the Age

A writer generally is a product of his age and Maugham is no exception. He belongs to an age that has been called " an Age of Interrogation " ; this age does not take anything at its face value, it tries to go to the root of everything ; and Maugham is typical of the twentieth century. He has taken up an attitude of enquiry. We are, however, not concerned here with such a vague influence. We are concerned here with such glaring characteristics as Maugham has in common with the general run of contemporary writers.

One of the most prominent tendencies of the twentieth century writers is to satirise the aristocratic society. In Maugham we do not find this tendency so strong as in, say, Bernard Shaw or Galsworthy. Scattered through his work there are hints of this tendency which becomes prominent in a drama by Maugham called *Our Betters*, where it is noticeable in a very marked degree.

Maugham like his contemporaries is convinced of the rottenness of the aristocratic society. In *Our Betters* he tears away the painted veil which had concealed the ugliness of the real state of that society. Fleming remarks :

> There is something in these surroundings that makes me feel terribly uncomfortable. Under the brilliant surface I suspect all kinds of ugly and

shameful secrets that everyone knows and pretends not to. This is a strange house in which the husband is never seen and Arthur Fenwick, a vulgar sensualist, acts as host; and it's an attractive spectacle, this painted duchess devouring with her eyes a boy young enough to be her son and the conversation—I don't want to seem prude, I dare say people over here talk more freely than the people I've known. [1]

Maugham paints a society, where there is no naturalness, no peace, no frankness, no honesty. The words of Pearl to Bessie disclose a horrible state of society :

Elio Glostor, Sadie Twickenham, Naimie Hartlepool.....you don't imagine they're faithful to their husbands. They didn't marry them for that.

This is a touch by which Maugham imparts the sense of universality of that rottenness; it is not confined to Pearl and the duchess alone but it extends to many others. The first impression the play imparts, is that Maugham is condemning sexual infidelity. But that is not the case. Sexual infidelity does not count very much with Maugham. [2] Going much deeper he reveals the true state of the present aristocratic society of England. It is money that gives one status in that society. A peer there marries a girl for her dowry and does not care much whether she remains faithful to him or not. He does not ignore a lapse in his wife for the sake of peace and happiness (for the sake of which Maugham advocates tolerance), but ignores it because it is to his interest to tolerate that, his concern being with money. Maugham seeks to expose the inherent rottenness of the society which allows itself to be bought and sold. Pearl sneers at the English and boasts openly :

We have to force ourselves upon them.....The English can never resist getting something for nothing. If a fiddler is in vogue, they'll hear him at my concert.....I've got power, I've got influence. But

[1] *Our Betters.*

[2] *Vide* Chapter VII, Section VII.

everything I have got—my success, my reputation, notoriety—I've bought it, bought it, bought it. [1]

Maugham, however, is not a propagandist but an artist. The condition of the aristocratic society for once provided him with a theme for a drama but he does not like to use it over and over again. In one or two other plays he also makes sly hits at the rotten society but nowhere else does this satirising tendency get the upper hand; it remains subordinate.

An author, specially one who has to depend upon the public for his livelihood, has to respect the conventions of society in which he lives. Before the war open discussion about matters concerning sex was taboo. [2] Maugham says in *Mrs. Craddock* (1902), " It is terrible to be desirous of saying all sorts of passionate things, while convention prevents you from speaking anything but the most commonplace." The result is that all through the book we see Maugham indulge in sentimentality which comes out of the suppressed sexual atmosphere. In that book there are purple patches which we do not get in the books written after the War. We get there phrases like ' beautiful youth, ' ' a virgin heart, ' etc.; Bertha Craddock asserts that she " is suffering so much that she could kill herself." In *The Hero* James says to Mrs. Clibborn, " What can you do to ease the bitter aching of my heart ?" This kind of sentimentality and melodramatic utterances at once point to an undercurrent of physical passion and suppressed feeling which could not be frankly expressed in pre-War days. An embrace then had to stand for both embrace and something more and an author naturally took much pains to describe an embrace. The change in public mentality effected a subtle change in the writings of Maugham; in *Cakes and Ale*, *The Narrow Corner*, *The Painted Veil* or *Theatre*, we never get such sentimental purple patches. The

[1] *Our Betters.*

[2] Even such an innocent book as *Mrs. Craddock* was published by Heinemann with omissions.

description has become straightforward and matter-of-fact. Now he can call a spade a spade with impunity.

There is one other matter in which a change in public taste has brought about a great change in the art of an author. In the last decade of the nineteenth century Oscar Wilde created a vogue for artificial sparkling dialogues and the public taste did not change till after the War. Gradually the vogue of colloquialism in drama came into existence as a result of a demand for naturalism on the stage. As a result the dramatists had to give up the mode of Oscar Wilde and make their dialogues colloquial. Maugham is one of the dramatists who had to adapt himself to this change in public taste. In earlier dramas like *Lady Frederick* we get ample proof of the influence of the school of Oscar Wilde, but in recent dramas like, say, *The Circle*, though there is a considerable amount of witty dialogue, they are all in colloquial and simple language. The actors now have become so used to colloquialism that they become helpless if the language be otherwise. Maugham tells us of a sad experience of his.[1] In *Sacred Flame* he tried to make his characters speak not in the words they would have actually spoken, but in a more formal manner " using phrases they would have used if they had been able to prepare them beforehand and had they known how to put what they wanted to say in exact and well-chosen language." But the actors were unable to deliver that naturally and Maugham had to make slight alterations to suit them. This fact is not as insignificant as it may seem to a layman ; it has changed the whole character of the dialogue which is an essential factor in a play.

The influence of science on Maugham needs a passing mention here. The inexorable laws of Physics, *i.e.*, the laws of Nature, exact a reverence and awe from many modern English writers which Fate did from the ancient Greek Tragedians. We may say that the laws of Nature have taken the

[1] *The Summing Up.*

place of the Greek Fate. We shall discuss in detail the effect of this influence on Somerset Maugham later in Chapter VII (" In Quest of Peace, " Section 1).

The greatest influence on the writers of to-day is perhaps that of Freud and his school of Psycho-analysis. The vogue of psycho-analysis is now so widespread that it has become a characteristic of the twentieth century, just like its other characteristic, social criticism. It has ceased to be the influence of a single scientist. It is now one of the influences of the age. Psycho-analysis existed before Freud, but here what is particularly meant by the term is that portion of psycho-analysis which never existed before, the search into the subconscious and the unconscious.

Except in one place [1] Maugham has never mentioned Freud ; still it would seem that he has been using the researches of the Freudian school in his novels from the very first. And this is only to be expected, for Maugham is a doctor. Of course, the influence of psycho-analysis has not entered into Maugham's work so organically as it has for instance into that of Joyce. Still there are certain things in his novels which bear strong marks of a Freudian parentage.

One of his debts to Freud is dream symbolism [2] (for Freud is, without a doubt, the greatest psycho-analyst of our time to have analysed dreams). In *Rain* this is used with a very striking effect. Davidson, the missionary, dreams a strange dream.

" This morning he told me that he'd been dreaming about the mountains of Nebraska, " Mrs. Davidson says to Dr. Macphail.

" That's curious," said Dr. Macphail.

It is curious indeed ; Dr. Macphail remembers to have seen them through the windows of the train when he crossed America. " They were like huge mole hills, rounded and

[1] In *Theatre.*

[2] *Vide* Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams*, Chapter V ; also, Dr. William Stekel, *The Meaning of Dream Symbolism.*

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smooth, and they rose from the plain abruptly." It strikes Dr. Macphail that they are like a woman's breasts. The meaning of this dream becomes very clear when Davidson commits suicide after having succumbed to the charms of Sadie Thompson, the "Scarlet Woman." This dream shows which way the wind is blowing. The subconscious mind is gradually getting the upper hand. As long as Davidson had full control over his body he had escaped. But when he is considerably weakened physically owing to irregular dieting and even fasting, he gradually loses control over his body, and his subconscious thought first shows its growing strength through that dream. Subconsciously Davidson, perhaps, was always inclined to sinning, and his militant hatred of the sinners, Sadie Thompson, and the natives unused to the restrictions of civilization, is only the outward expression of the inward struggle between the conscious piety and "the subconscious." It has been asserted by the Psycho-analytic school of Freud [1] that a hidden inclination for one thing often produces a violent hatred on the surface against it. St. Paul's joy in persecuting the Christians in his early life has been said to be the result of the reaction of the conscious against an inner inclination towards them. It was the same with Davidson. Blanche Stroeve's violent hatred for Strickland is ony the reaction of the conscious mind against the physical attraction she feels for Strickland and to which she at last succumbs.[2]

The dream is a favourite instrument with Maugham to reveal the workings of the human mind. Generally of course he does not take the help of symbolism—it would have gone over the heads of most of his readers if he had, except such simple symbols as used in *Rain*. Neil Macadam, when sick and weak in body, dreams of Darya in his arms; he knows that "One can't help one's dreams, but they are an indication

[1] By the school of Psycho-analysis I have always meant the school of Freud and not of Jung or Adler.

[2] *The Moon and Sixpence.*

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of what is going on in the subconscious." [1] He struggles against that attempt of the subscious getting the upper hand and, unlike Davidson, succeeds. Kitty's hope that Townsend really loves her, is revealed in a dream in which she dreams of Charlie Townsend embracing her and saying that it was all a mistake. [2] The Russian journalist's wife dreams that her husband is trying to kill her by throwing her over the balusters. The journalist commenting on that says to the narrator :

> She thought I hated her, she thought I would gladly be rid of her ; she knew of course she was insufferable, and at some time or other the idea had evidently occurred to her that I was capable of murdering her. The thoughts of men are incalculable and ideas enter our minds that we should be ashamed to confess.[3]

It is a clear analysis. Dreams have been used before Freud drew our attention to their importance ; but it is undoubtedly due to the influence of Freud that they have been given so much prominence in this century.

Maugham has also taken from the psycho-analysts the theory of sublimation. Talking about the cause of Julia's success Michael remarks :

> All those instincts went into her acting.....Sublimation. That's it. I often think that's what's made her such a great actress.[4]

The psycho-analysts have taught Maugham that the same force incites the creative activities of the body as well as those of art. When the body is starved the creative impulse produces artistic inspiration. In Maugham there is no instance where an artist is at the same time a passionate lover. The creative force, when denied one outlet, takes another. Charles Strickland is able to put all his energies into painting when he is

[1] *Neil Macadam, Ah king.*
[2] *The Painted Veil.*
[3] *The Dream, Cosmopolitans.*
[4] *Theatre.*

throughly disgusted with sexual life.[1] Edward Driffield's passion for Rosie exhausted, he is able to write his masterpiece.[2] Mrs. Albert Forrester writes her masterpiece "The Achilles Statue" when her husband leaves her.[3] The theory of sublimation[4] does not apply only in the cases where the sexual energy has been diverted to the channel of creative art. It also applies in the case of Walter, whose passion for Kitty being obstructed finds expression in his sacrifice for suffering humanity, or in the case of Kitty who takes to nursing babies and other humanitarian works.[5] It may even be applied in the case of Michael who concentrates all his energies in organising his theatre when Julia, his wife, gives up indulging in "in all such nonsense."[6]

There are a few cases of sexual aberration in Maugham's works. Here also one may trace the influence of the psychoanalysts. After the War such aberrations have become a very common thing and the talk of the day. In Maugham's earlier works we cannot expect to find any use of that. In *Theatre* (1937), he makes a dramatic use of it. Dolly de Vries has a passion for Julia. Julia points that out to Michael. "What a filthy mind you 've got, Julia !" he exclaims. But that does not prevent Michael from making use of Dolly's homosexual tendency. Together they manage to get Dolly to finance their scheme of opening a theatre; Julia good-humouredly points out to Michael that he is acting like Claudio in *Measure for Measure* when he presses her to get round Dolly.[7] Maugham does not make use of such aberrations frequently as many of his contemporaries are doing. He never uses anything which does not help the progress of the

[1] *The Moon and Sixpence.*
[2] *Cakes and Ale.*
[3] *The Creative Impulse, First Person Singular.*
[4] *Vide* Havelock Ellis, *Psychology of Sex* (in one volume), Chapter VIII.
[5] *The Painted Veil.*
[6] *Theatre.*
[7] *Ibid.*

story. It would have been against his nature if he had used sexual perversity for its own sake.

There is another matter for which Maugham may be suspected of being directly indebted to the scientific school of psychology, though it has been used by writers of antiquity. It is the theory of Sadism and Masochism. It has been found that there are some persons who like being tortured and love the tormentors better for the pain that they inflict on them. In men this peculiar fact (masochism) is an aberration but in women it is to some extent natural. Sadism is quite the opposite. [1] Maugham used this even in his first novel, *Liza of Lambeth*. Liza succumbs to Jim when he gives her "a violent swinging blow on the stomach." After that he commands, "Come on" and Liza loses all power of resistance. Jim's brute force makes her love him and hate Tom who is gentle and tender. Bertha Craddock remarks, "It is a commonplace that some wives will stand anything from their husbands; it seems they love them all the more because they are brutal. I think I'm like that." [2] When Lawson whips his wife Ethel she feels a strange exultation. "What he had done did not outrage her when she looked at herself in the glass and arranged her hair, her eyes were shining. There was a strange look in them. Perhaps then she was nearer loving him than she had ever been before." [3] Lawson's addiction to wife-beating may be taken as an example of sadism as also the brutality of Jim [4]; but Maugham does not make use of this as much as he makes use of masochism. [5]

In the cases that we have looked into Maugham has not used the ordinary psychology of individuals, as the writers

[1] *Vide* Havelock Ellis, *Psychology of Sex* (in one volume), Chapter V.

[2] *Mrs. Craddock.*

[3] *The Pool, The Trembling of a Leaf.*

[4] *Liza of Lambeth.*

[5] *Vide* Havelock Ellis, *Psychology of Sex* (in one volume), Chapter IV. In his latest novel, *Christmas Holiday*, Maugham paints another extremely masochistic woman in Lydia. In the same book (p. 284) he has slightly touched upon what is known as 'Œdipus Complex.'

of old have always done ; like many of his contemporaries he has also drawn upon the fund of knowledge that Freud and others have provided his generation with.

III

Of Life and Career

" I have had a varied, and often an interesting life, but not an adventurous one," Maugham remarks in his autobiography ; one cannot but be amused by the comment made on this statement by Mr. R. H. Ward. He informs us :

> It is unnecessary for an artist to have an ' interesting ' or an ' eventful ' life, for all life, however dull and ordinary it may appear, is interesting and eventful : it is human life, and that is enough. Remarkably little ' happened ' to Jane Austen, but she did not lack material for her novels. .....More happens in the mind than in material circumstances, and a man who has lived always in a country village, a woman who has spent her time in cooking and cleaning have as much to write about, as others whose lives have been full of outward and visible happenings.[1]

Quite true ; but a cook or a maid servant can only write within her narrow limits of vision ; no lively imagination can help her picture the household of a duke or the life in China or Tahiti. A Jane Austen cannot write the novels of Stevenson, Conrad or Maugham. The nature of an author's writings depends considerably on his experiences.

About his travels Maugham says, " I have gone into the world because I thought it was necessary in order to get the experience without which I could not write. "[2] His experiences as a medical student provided him with materials for *Liza of Lambeth* ; his experiences in life at Whitsable, at Paris and Heidelberg and London were utilized in *Of Human Bondage* and enabled him to write *Mrs. Craddock.*

[1] R. H. Ward, *W. Somerset Maugham.*

[2] *The Summing Up.*

But soon he found that he had exhausted his store ; he could not produce anything new ; it would only be in some way or other repetitions of what he had already produced ; it would be tedious. The War provided him with materials which he utilised afterwards when writing the delighful detective stories,[1] but it was a small fund. The thing that made a complete change in his writings was his journey to the South Seas. It opened up a new vista. Maugham himself has given a clear idea of the strength of the new experience :

> I found a new self. Ever since I left St. Thomas Hospital I had lived with people who attached value to culture. I had come to think there was nothing in the world more important than art. I looked for a meaning in the universe and the only meaning I could find was the beauty that men here and there produced. On the surface my life was varied and exciting ; but beneath it was narrow. Now I entered a new world and the instinct in me of a novelist went out to absorb the novelty..... What excited me was to meet one person after another who was new to me. I was like a naturalist who comes into a country where the fauna are of unimaginable variety. [2]

It provided him not only with a vast canvas but with the figures to put on it ; it not only provided him with a background of unimaginable beauty, it also provided an opportunity of seeing the drama of life played against it. Maugham had too good an observant eye to miss anything. They all came back to him when he was writing in spite of his bad memory which he laments in his autobiography. The journey to the South Seas was not his last long journey. After his recovery from tuberculosis he travelled to China and *The Painted Veil* is the product of his experience gathered there ; he found there the original of at least Mother Superior, if not of the other characters ; perhaps it was here that he found the original of the delightful Dr. Saunders, [3] the first sketch of whom we find in *On a China Screen.*

[1] *Ashenden.*
[2] *The Summing Up.*
[3] *The Narrow Corner.*

Very few have drawn from their own lives so much material as Somerset Maugham. He has imagination enough but his foot is so firmly planted on earth that his imagination cannot soar, it can only give colour to materials which Maugham has gathered from real life. He may be said to be a realist. He not only puts down his experiences on paper with some modifications but puts in much of himself, his own doubts and misgivings, beliefs and disbeliefs and opinions (which, by the way, is only a product of his experience) into his writings. Of his plays he remarks, " Even in my lightest pieces I had put in so much of myself that I was embarrassed to hear it disclosed to a crowd of people." [1] And what he says of his plays is more true of his novels and short stories—*Of Human Bondage*, *The Fall of Edward Barnard*, *The Narrow Corner*, etc., are records of his mind.

His travels and experiences not only gave him the knowledge of men, they also taught him tolerance. After many journeys he came to the conclusion that " the heart of men is in the right place, but their head is a thoroughly inefficient organ." [2] They only deserve sympathy and tolerance. The journeys have made him conclude, unlike Chekov, that the human race is not by nature cruel and callous.

1 *The Summing Up.*

2 *Ibid.*

CHAPTER IV

A Note on Technique

I

Mechanical Devices

Mechanical devices are essential to a novelist to unfold his story and the difference between a good and a bad artist lies to a great extent in the art of concealing the obviousness of these devices from the reader,—in the power of distracting the reader's attention from this mechanical side of the structure with its rough angularities. One of such devices is the time-shift of which Maugham has become a master. It is a device by which the author goes backwards or forwards and thus makes his story complete. This practice is common to writers, who relate the story from an omniscient point of view as distinguished from the method followed by authors who leave the story to be told by each character. Most of the modern writers, however, do not follow the old method of writing from an omniscient point of view but take some pains to make that time-shift natural; for example, they pursue the thoughts of a character in the story and go back to the antecedents. It is interesting to note how Maugham has used and developed this instrument.

In his first novels we do not get the use of this device in a marked degree. In *Explorer* we find the first trace of this device.[1] But compared with his recent novels it is nothing. In *Of Human Bondage* we find again the straightforward narrative. It is in *The Moon and Sixpence* that we first get this device fairly developed.

[1] When Alec tells Lucy the story of his life.

In *The Moon and Sixpence* we find these mechanical devices becoming progressively faultless. He has used the first person singular, which, as we shall see later, suits him ; and he has tried the device of time-shift. The narrator begins by speaking of Strickland's fame after his death and then goes back naturally to the early days of his acquaintance with him. He then proceeds with the story until their final parting in Paris. Then there is another shift and we come to a period, many years after that parting, nearly to the period when the story begins. The narrator tells of his visit to Tahiti, the direct result of which is the book. At Tahiti he became acquainted with the details of Strickland's life. The time is shifted back to the period when Strickland landed there and the story is carried forward until his death. The last time-shift brings us almost to the present ; it tells us of the narrator's return from Tahiti and his meeting with Strickland's family.

We find these shifts of time no doubt but they are hardly noteworthy. If the first chapter be not taken into consideration we may fail to find out any time-shift at all. And in the first chapter there is very little ingenuity and mastery shown in using the time-shift. In *The Painted Veil*, however, we find that he has mastered this device. The story begins dramatically at a period when Kitty has already been seduced by Townsend. The time is shifted with the thoughts in Kitty's mind to the days when she was not married to Walter. We are told of Kitty's family and how she came to marry Walter. Then we are told of their first days in Tehing-Yen and how she came to know Townsend. Thus gradually we come to the time when the story began and the story then moves on without any more time-shift.

In *Theatre* we find the highest perfection of this device. The story opens with the introduction of Tom into Julia's life. Very naturally she presents him with a photograph of hers. When he is gone, she looks at the

photographs methodically arranged and the memories of the dead past come to her quite naturally and we come to know of her early life on the stage; we are introduced to Jimmie Langton; we are told how she is married to Michael and of their gradual rise in the theatrical world. We are posted up-to-date in this way and we are now prepared to move on with the real story, Julia's fascination for Tom and her emancipation from that.

Maugham's use of the first person singular is nothing but a device which suits his temperament. In *The Moon and Sixpence* he tries this device first and between this novel and *Cakes and Ale* where he last uses it, he has written a number of short stories in first person singular. There are obvious advantages of this device. The ordinary method used in writing a novel had been that of the omniscient author revealing facts which sometimes strikes the reader as impossible to have been known by the author; it tends to destroy the illusion of the story, if the writer does not possess a fascinating personality which can be felt by the reader, or, in other words, the reader feels the intrusion of the writer and sometimes resents it. In writing in the first person singular, Maugham has this advantage that the reader never feels the irritation which the omniscience of the author sometimes arouses. This makes the reader feel very intimate with the narrator; he is quite at home with the workings of the narrator's mind, the feelings and sentiments that flit in and out. The reader understands the point of view of Ashenden in *Cakes and Ale*; it never hurts his sense of logic when Ashenden gives his estimates of others' characters or when he is told something which he could not know otherwise. It has its disadvatages also; it binds the hands of the author and he cannot take any liberty when informing his reader of an important development and sometimes (as we shall see when we are dealing with his short stories) he has to slip into the role of the omniscient author to do that.

This difficulty is considerably lessened when the author uses a variation of this first person singular, namely, writing from the angle of vision of a character in the story. The difference of this method with the other one just mentioned is that in this method the narrator is the author who presents the angle of vision of one character in the story ; in the other method the narrator is a character in the story. In his first three or four novels Maugham is the omniscient author ; in *Mrs. Craddock* however we find him trying to adopt this method. But the angle of vision there does not remain constant ; it shifts from Bertha Craddock to Mrs. Ley and back, sometimes to the other characters too. This shifting of the angle of vision no doubt enriches the novel and helps the novelist in producing a sense of variety and in depicting fully rounded characters. Whether Maugham's adoption of the method of using one angle of vision indicates that he thinks it the better method of the two is merely a matter of conjecture. We can only note that as he grows mature he gives up this method of shifting his angle of vision ; perhaps the singleness of the angle of vision is suitable to him because it is easier for him to identify himself consistently with one character. Anyhow, in *The Explorer* he still shifts his angle of vision and it is the same with other novels written before *Of Human Bondage*. In *Of Human Bondage* we find this art finally developed. We are made to see everything through the eyes of Philip Carey. This is perhaps the best method possible (at least as far as such themes as are dealt with in *Of Human Bondage* are concerned) ; it prevents the reader from questioning the illusion of authenticity which is the measure of a great novel. The value of this method can be judged very clearly from Conrad's *Almayer's Folly*, as Ames has pointed out. The reader gets a consistent impression as long as the story is told from the angle of Almayer ; it seems quite possible to the reader that Conrad must have somehow got the story out of Almayer ; but when the angle is unnecessarily shifted to

Almayer's Malaya wife and other characters the impression of continuity is broken; the illusion of reality is impaired. "The reader begins to wonder if all these people had told Conrad their secrets. That being improbable, he must have made up the whole thing and its authenticity is lost."[1] The reader does not become throughly disgusted only because of the story interest.

After Maugham had perfected this method in *Of Human Bondage* he has used it always, except where he has used the first person singular itself. In *The Painted Veil*, the angle of vision is that of Kitty, in *The Narrow Corner* that of Dr. Saunders, in *Theatre* that of Julia. In *The Moon and Sixpence* or *Cakes and Ale* too we get one particular angle of vision, only that happens to be that of the narrator himself, the extreme case of such particularised angle of vision.

In this method the author gets all the advantages of using the first person singular getting rid of its disadvantages. When in *The Narrow Corner* we are told of the happening in the garden (the courting of Louise by Fred Blake), or when we are told of the doings of Erik Christessen after he found out Louise compromised with Fred Blake (which could not have been known by Dr. Saunders, whose angle of vision is being presented to us), this fault of the author does not seem to us as grievous as it would have been if it was written in the first person singular; these faults are covered up by the charm of the narrative.

These are the devices on which Maugham's novels stand; but these are so concealed, so fitted in with the plot, that they never strike the reader as only technical devices; they never give the impression of being mechanical. This is undoubtedly a sign of the writer's genius. "The technical devices," Maugham remarks at one place, "that an author uses to capture your interest are his own affair. Such a one as the 'stream of thought' is an amusing trick, but it is of

[1] Ames, *Aesthetic of the Novel.*

no more real importance than the epistolary style which was in vogue during the eighteenth century." [1] Those tricks are the author's " own affair " no doubt but there is one connection which they have with the reader, it is that they must never be taken as obvious tricks by a reader. Maugham's mastery lies in his success in concealing the tricks.

II

The Hand of the Dramatist

How to begin a story has always been a serious problem with novelists. The English novelists of older times generally began from the beginning and plodded on to the end ; this even the modern novelists do sometimes but with a difference—they try to make the beginning dramatic. The essential factor in a novel is its story interest ; the character-sketching reveals the genius of the novelist no doubt—a novel without good sketches is a bad novel,—but (despite contemporary novelists like Virginia Woolf) a novel without a story interest, though a novelty, is no novel at all. A good novel must be able to get a firm hold on the reader to demand all his attention from the start to the finish and the beginning is a factor in creating this interest in the reader. The reader must be made at once interested in the story ; in this busy world a dull beginning will not do. It is very difficult to find the reader who will read through a dozen pages of dry descriptions, of place, of characters and of time, to come to the real story interest. What is needed is a dramatic opening like that of, say, the *Pit and the Pendulum* of Edgar Allan Poe :

> I was sick—sick unto death with that long agony and when they at last unbound me, and I was permitted to sit, I felt that my senses were

[1] Preface, *Cosmopolitans*.

leaving me. The sentence—the dread sentence of death—was the last distinct accentuation that reached my ears.

It makes the reader sit up and take notice; he plunges into the story at once. Maugham knows this art. The sense of drama is like a sixth sense in him and the profession of a dramatist has developed it fully.

Here is a typical beginning:

She gave a startled cry.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

Notwithstanding the darkness of the shuttered room he saw her face on a sudden distraught with terror. [1]

We do not however get such dramatic beginnings in the first two or three of his novels. His first novel begins with the description of Vere Street, Lambeth, on the first Saturday afternoon in August. It is a straightforward description of the old type. But it did not take him long to develop the art of dramatic beginning—he has cultivated it almost religiously. He does not of course always begin as dramatically as in *The Painted Veil*, yet he begins always from a dramatic moment from which the story goes on effortlessly.

There cannot be any doubt that this art is to a great extent an effect of his training as a dramatist. The profession of a dramatist has had another influence on his novels and it is of far greater importance than the art of dramatic beginning. The profession of a dramatist has taught him law and order. "My prepossessions in art," he says, "are on the side of law and order. I like a story that fits. I did not take to writing stories seriously till I had had much experience as a dramatist and this experience taught me to leave out everything that did not serve the dramatic value of my story. It taught me to make incident follow incident in such a manner

[1] *The Painted Veil.*

as to lead up to the climax I had in mind." [1] An examination of *Liza of Lambeth*, which was written before he had tried his hand at drama, gives a clear idea as to how much his training as a dramatist has done.

At the time of writing his first novel Maugham's assets were his keen power of observation and a natural aptitude for writing dialogues, and in that novel we find ample proof of these powers. Whenever he finds an opportunity he uses them and he uses them without discrimination, without restraint. He does not yet know the value of condensation; he cannot yet select. He uses descriptions which have little to do with the main trend of the story. The opening picture, we admit, is required, for without creating the atmosphere of frolic and mirth he could not create the condition in which Liza meets Jim; it creates an opportunity for Jim to show his effrontery in kissing Liza, and that boldness attracts Liza, and the story moves on. But this cannot be said of the feasting scenes. No doubt the scene is not altogether useless; it shows how Liza is getting fascinated by Jim and repulsed by Tom's address. But Maugham rambles too much; he cannot restrain himself from showing his power of observation and mastery of dialogue, to show which he takes too much space. It would not have been like this if it had been one of his matured novels.

This prolixity disappears as a result of his experience as a dramatist. A dramatist has no time to ramble, he has got to pick up the essentials and fit them together to get an even flow to the end. In writing a novel Maugham was not bound by any such compulsory restriction; but once used to such restriction in writing his plays he does not give it up, and this habit, we must say, has done him much good as a novelist. Such well-knit stories may not resemble life in which stories straggle but nevertheless they are good stories.

[1] Preface, *Altogether*.

"The story-teller arranges life to suit his purposes. He follows a design in mind, leaving out this and changing that; he distorts facts to his advantage, according to his plan; and when he attains his object produces a work of art." [1]

The novels written after he had become an experienced dramatist show an immense improvement in his art compared with his first few novels. The novels [2] written in the first decade of this century show many immaturities but they also show that Maugham has already learnt the art of selection. He has learnt restraint; he does not put in unnecessary episodes.

This frugality becomes so ingrained in him that even in *Of Human Bondage*, where it is quite expected that he would ramble when dealing with the life of Philip, he manages to produce a well-knit work of art; if he had rambled it would have been quite in accordance with the English tradition. In similar books, say, Thackeray's *Newcomes*, we find this rambling; in attempting to give a picture of society Thackeray has given us episodes which do not, in any way, help to mould the character of the hero or to develop the plot. Speaking about this characteristic of English novels Maugham remarks:

> Our great novels are shapeless and unwieldy. [3] It has pleased the English to like this laxity of construction, this haphazard conduct of a rambling story, this wandering in and out of curious characters who have nothing much to do with the theme.....The sermons that Henry James breathe to the English on form in the novel aroused their interest but little affected their practice. [4]

[1] Preface, *Altogether*.

[2] Even in *Mrs. Craddock* (1902) there are some scenes which should have been left out, as the constantly repeated scenes where Bertha scolds her husband for coldness. These scenes are so similar that they cannot but bore the reader. In *Theatre* where there is a set of similar circumstances, Maugham takes care to avoid such repetitions. But it must be noted that these repetitions in *Mrs. Craddock* are not exactly irrelevancies; they show how Bertha is becoming a shrew; they become tedious because Maugham cannot conceal their similarities.

[3] "H. G. Wells declared in a lecture once that the novel was a kind of lucky bag in which anything and everything was to be found." (Walpole, *English Novel*.)

[4] *The Summing Up*.

Maugham's great novel *Of Human Bondage* is anything but " shapeless and unwieldy ". Maugham gives us a hint about the central theme of the novel in the book itself :

> Philip was occupied with the forming of a pattern out of the manifold chaos of life.

And every incident related goes to make up that pattern. We are given only a selection of the experiences which have gone to mould Philip, which have helped to develop his character ; we have only been given the " pattern " of his life, we need not know " the manifold chaos " of it.

We are told of Philip's early childhood, of his romantic imagination, and the gradual disillusionment which comes as a result of his increasing contact with the realities of life ; we are told how his faith in a benevolent and omnipotent God is shaken ; for some time Perkins, the headmaster, comes between Philip and his tendency of becoming an atheist. The episodes of his school life, mostly cruel, help to mould his character ; he becomes more and more shy, reserved and bitter. His life in Paris, Heidelberg and London makes him completely disillusioned about life. There is a panoramic procession of characters like Hayward, Miss Wilkinson, Week, Cacilie, Mildred and many others who come into Philip's life and pass away, but they all leave him maturer, they all leave their mark on him ; it is not a case of " wandering in and out of curious characters who have nothing much to do with the theme. "

The same can be said of the novels that follow *Of Human Bondage*. The incidents in *The Painted Veil* help to build up Kitty's character, its first stage and the transformation. In the *Cakes and Ale* the incidents do not help to mould any character but they reveal Rosie Driffield and others from all sides ; there is almost no incident which does not throw a new light on one side or the other of the characters. In *The Narrow Corner* incidents lead to incidents producing the

final catastrophe. The *Theatre* is made up of incidents leading to and showing Julia's fascination for Tom and incidents leading to her disillusionment. The preliminary chapters dealing with Julia's early life are not in the least irrelevant to the main plot. We are told in those chapters how Julia's character was moulded, how she fell in love with Michael and how she got over it. Without the help of these chapters it would not have been possible to know the state of mind she was in. She had been out of love for a long time and that explains why she is so eager to fall in love with Tom.

"Everything that has no relation to the story must be ruthlessly thrown away," Chekov says in his advice to Schoukin. "If in the first chapter you say that a gun hung on the wall, in the second or third chapter it must without fail be discharged." [1] We shall see later that Chekov himself does not follow this advice sometimes; but Maugham, after he attained maturity, has seldom deviated from this principle laid down so clearly by Chekov. Even the dyspepsia of Captain Nichols in *The Narrow Corner* has a cause for its existence; without its existence Dr. Saunders cannot get a passage on board the ship, and if Dr. Saunders be not on board, the ship need not go to Kanda-Meira to drop Dr. Saunders there, and naturally in that case the tragedy cannot happen; Captain Nichols's dyspepsia therefore is an essential factor. It is not there to raise a laugh as Mrs. Kemp's rheumatism in *Liza of Lambeth* does.

But as Maugham has pointed out, even Chekov did not always follow his own dictum. In *The Bishop*, "the Bishop eats some tainted fish and a few days later dies of typhoid; we may suppose that it was the tainted fish that killed him. If that is so he did not die of typhoid, but of Ptomaine poisoning, and the symptoms were not as described." [2] In fact Chekov has no necessity of making the Bishop eat the

[1] Quoted in the Preface to *Altogether*.

[2] Preface, *Altogether*.

tainted fish. In Maugham's case too, there are one or two such slips. One of them occurs in *Cakes and Ale*. Maugham goes on there to describe how the career of Jasper Gibbon was made by Mrs. Burton; it takes him four or five pages to do that and the only point in doing that is to illustrate Mrs. Barton's power of 'making' careers. In fact he so abandons himself to his free and homely style that he forgets his habitual restraint. Still there is some excuse for it, though it is rather a flimsy one, and what is more creditable to Maugham, this sort of rambling is a very rare thing for him.

In two ways therefore we find Maugham's profession of a dramatist has influenced his novels. It has taught him how and when to begin a story. It has decided the form of his novels, ranging him by the side of Chekov, Henry James, Maupassant, Stephan Zweig and others who advocate plots without digressions.

III

The Best Form

In his characteristically high-handed manner Mr. R. H. Ward tells us that "a work of art should, as it were, return in the end to the place where it began, and should be balanced not only in the aspects of its timing, but in all its aspects, as a circle is balanced"[1]; and judging according to this dictum he thinks that this is the reason that makes Huxley's novel, *Eyeless in Gaza*, "so satisfying a novel." There cannot be a shallower judgment. "There is not a critic alive now," says Virginia Woolf, in an article in *Nation*, "who will say that a novel is a work of art and that as such he will judge it"; apparently she had no opportunity of taking Mr. R. H. Ward into consideration.

[1] R. H. Ward, *W. Somerset Maugham*.

Maugham has not produced any novel which can satisfy Mr. Ward's craving for " the symbol for a circle " ; " he fails to make a pattern, in his timing as in his construction," Mr. Ward points out.[1] Apparently Mr. Ward has forgotten for the moment that the essential factor in a novel is not its mechanical form, it is the sense of life that it imparts that makes the value of a novel. " We know of novels," Lubbock points out, " which everybody admits to be badly constructed, but which is so full of life that it does not seem to matter. May we not conclude that form, design, composition, have a rather different bearing upon the art of fiction than any they may have elsewhere ?" [2] Lubbock has come to the conclusion that " the best form is that which makes the most of the subject—there is no other definition of the meaning of form." This is an astute judgment. It gives stress to the fact that in fiction form follows matter ; there is one form that suits one kind of subject, there is another to suit a different one. The greatest thing is to sustain the interest and to do that a harmony between form and matter is necessary.

Maugham's novels may not satisfy Mr. Ward's craving for form, but they satisfy the readers. They seldom have fluctuating story interest ; Maugham has the power, as all the great writers of fiction have to take the reader with him. This he can do because he choses a form " which makes the most of the subject." We are of course leaving out the immature novels for obvious reasons. His mature novels, *Of Human Bondage*, *The Painted Veil*, *Cakes and Ale*, *The Narrow Corner*, *Theatre*, show varying forms adopted to do proper justice to the matter.

Of Human Bondage is a novel in which the author has not used the device of time-shift ; it is a straightforward narrative which makes Mr. Ward take it for an " uninspired "

[1] R. H. Ward, *W. Somerset Maugham*.

[2] *The Craft of Fiction*.

novel. It begins from the childhood of Philip Carey, moves on with Philip growing into manhood and ends with his marriage with Sally. In spite of its being " uninspired " it is the most moving of Maugham's novels. The reason is not far to seek ; it is the fact that for a subject of this type a straightforward narrative is most appealing. The author tells us about the growth and development of Philip's mind, how the incidents of his life gradually moulds him. If he had used time-shift, supposing he was master of it, then, he would have had to make Philip remember his early life, sitting comfortably in a room neatly arranged by his industrious wife, Sally. He could not have used the ever-changing time-shifts which Huxley has used in *Eyeless in Gaza* ; it would have broken the continuity and marred the interest ; it could not have given the impression of Philip gradually growing up under the hard buffets of life. If he had used ever-changing time-shifts, it would have been something like the method used in the first portion of *Theatre* where we are informed of Julia's early life. It would have been an absolutely unnecessary artifice and the obviousness of the artifice would have been its greatest defect. In *The Painted Veil* Maugham's main theme is the transformation of Kitty's soul. Naturally it was unnecessary to begin from the beginning ; he begins at a time when Kitty has already been seduced, when she has come to the lowest rung of her frivolous, unthinking and selfish self. But we must know her early life which would explain the events that have occurred, which would explain the nature that has been formed in her in an unthinking and shallow society. For that the time-shift has been very effective ; we do not lose sight of the main theme, and at the same time we know of the necessary past. A plain narrative has a charm which the complicated, ingenious pattern of time-shift of, say, Mr. Ford Madox-Ford, fails to produce. The straightforward narrative portion of *The Painted Veil* makes us feel with the characters, just as in the case of *Of Human*

Bondage; the time-shift is a device that helps effectively to tell us of those portions which do not fall in the period that is included in the main theme.

Cakes and Ale comes nearest to Mr. Ward's idea of " the symbol of a circle ". It begins at a time when Edward Driffield, the novelist, is already dead and Alroy Kear has taken up the task of writing his biography. He delicately approaches the narrator, asking him to supply materials for writing Edward Driffield's early life. The first talk with Kear about Driffield's early life, when the narrator is not directly asked to supply materials, makes him ruminate over the time when he had first heard of Edward's name at his uncle's table; it was not then a name much honoured there. Then the time is shifted to the ' present ' and we are told how the narrator is invited by Mrs. Driffield to stay with her for a few days. His mind flies back to the lunch he had with her when Edward was alive. Edward told the company that he had taught narrator to bicycle. The time is then naturally shifted forty years back when he learned to bicycle We then know of Edward's life at Blackstable, up to the time of his hurried exit from that place. There is another time-shift and we are told of the conversation of the narrator with Alroy Kear when he is made to promise to help him in writing Edward's biography. The next time-shift takes us back to the narrator's first years in London where he met the Driffields for the first time after their departure from Blackstable. We are told of Rosie's sweetness and unfaithfulness to her husband; we are told how Driffield's career was ' made ' by Mrs. Barton; we come to know how Rosie eloped with George Kemp. After that the narrator gradually had lost touch with him. We are then led to the ' present ' again, to the week-end the narrator is spending at Mrs. Driffield's. It does not end there; the time is again shifted slightly back and we come to know how he had met Rosie in America some time back.

It is a complicated pattern and it is satisfying to Mr. Ward as well as to other readers. It is not difficult to find out how that could happen. The fact is that the subject-matter just suits the pattern Maugham has adopted and it is the pattern that Mr. Ward happens to admire. The main theme is the ironical contrast in the attitudes of people towards Edward Driffield before and after his fame; it is also the author's intention to depict Rosie in a peculiar light, to prove her sweetness against the judgment of the posterity (that is, the admirers of Driffield), and to set up a contrast such varying shifts from the 'present' to the 'past' and back are very effective. Had the intention been to picture the life of Rosie Driffield, only a straightforward tale like that in *Of Human Bondage* would have been the best form to adopt; but it is a sort of contrast that is aimed at and for that purpose the form he has chosen is the best.

Maugham knows just how much the device of time-shift he can use and where. In *The Narrow Corner* he used very little of that time-shift. Mr. Ward's criticism of that novel is rather amusing :

> "The Narrow Corner" is not satisfying. Once more the time-shift is used, again clumsily and without plan, yet still with the effect that is intrinsic in it as a literary trick. Once more the construction, apart from the use of the time-shift, is faulty. And a new fault makes its first really distinctive appearance in this novel, that of digression.[1]

He complains that stories have been introduced which have nothing to do with the main story, that they "hold up the action of the main story and produce in the reader a sense of annoyance." Apparently the novel acts differently on the minds of different readers; it annoys Mr. Ward. He goes on to say, however, that "curiously enough, this lack of continuity and uncertainty of development do not disturb the same evenness of tone that this book shares with *Cakes and Ale*. It is curious indeed that Mr. Ward does not ask himself

[1] R. H. Ward, *W. Somerset Maugham*.

why that evenness is not disturbed by the digressions. If he had, he would have known that those disgressions are not really irrelevant, they are essential for the story and Maugham has taken the help of time-shift to tell us those stories which we need know to understand the main story.

It is not difficult to guess why the story begins with the appearance of Dr. Saunders in Takana. It gives the idea of an inexorable and unavoidable fate. If Saunders had not been in Takana he could not have met Blake and Nichols and in that case they would not have had any occasion to go to Kanda-Meira where the tragedy occurs, which apparently is the main theme. It may be argued that the first portion might have been told with the help of time-shift, the story beginning with the landing of Fred Blake in Kanda-Meira. But in that case the impression would have been different. The workings of Fate could not have been so plainly shown and, moreover, the tolerant and philosophic attitude of Dr. Saunders with which the reader is made to look at the events happening later on, could not have been properly emphasised. It might have been rather clumsy and the evenness of tone might have been broken. It was not at all necessary to try a complicated pattern when the simple narrative with minimum time-shift is so effective.

There are three so-called digressions in the story, Captain Nichols's relation with his wife, the relation between Christessen and Mrs. Frith, and Fred Blake's antecedents. The necessity of the last is obvious ; the antecedents of Fred Blake explain his presence in Takana where he meets Saunders. Captain Nichols's relation with his wife amuses the reader ; also, it makes the character of Nichols three-dimensional. Moveover, one must not lose sight of the fact that when Captain Nichols speaks of his wife, he also tells us of his life, how he always has to live from hand to mouth, which explains how he came to take the rather shady commission ; that portion, too, fits in with the main story ; it helps to give a sense of

completeness. The other digression is rather difficult to explain. After the suicide of Erik, Luise says to Dr. Saunders, " what he loved in me was my mother, and he never knew that either " ; later on she says, " Erik killed himself because I had fallen short of the ideal he had made of me." That ideal was Mrs. Frith and it was necessary not to leave that figure a mere shadow.

Maugham shows his mastery in inserting these essential stories with a perfect naturalness. Nichols, feeling very well with the help of Dr. Saunders's medicine, becomes communicative and tells how he was engaged to sail the schooner. What is more natural than Dr. Saunders asking Erik about Mrs. Frith after he returns from Frith's house ? We are never allowed to peep into Fred's past until it comes out in a most natural manner ; when Fred is excited and disgusted with himself after Erik's suicide, he tells Saunders about that himself. Maugham is such a master of his medium that these stories never hold up the main story interest. The reader never has a suspicion that it is a mere literary trick that Maugham takes the help of.

We cannot but conclude that the form of *The Narrow Corner* suits the purpose of the author and that the construction of the novel is not so faulty as Mr. Ward imagines. In Maugham's recent novel, *Theatre*, too we find the same mastery of technique. The main theme is Julia's love-affair with Tom and it begins where it germinates ; the time-shift is used to tell us of the past but we get a plain narrative where we are asked to feel with the characters.

It will be ridiculous to suppose that even slight changes in the patterns Maugham has adopted for his themes, would have marred the story interest. The fact is that the forms adopted suit the themes. It is a proved fact that a reader is more at home in a plain narrative. If the author wants to make a reader identify himself with his characters, the best way is the old way. Maugham knows that ; that is why

the main themes are always dealt with plainly, as in *Of Human Bondage*, but the antecedent stories are told with the help of time-shift. That is how Maugham makes the best of his subject.

IV

Concerning Short Stories

About his taking to writing short stories considerably late in his career Maugham says:

> " Though in early youth I had written a number of short stories, for a long time, twelve or fifteen years at least, occupied with the drama, I had ceased to do so, and when a journey to the South Seas unexpectedly provided me with theme that seemed to suit this medium, it was as a beginner of over forty that I wrote the story that is now called *Rain*. " [1]

When he began to write the short stories he was a master story-teller and in the case of short stories therefore we have not to look for a development; we find him in *Rain* a master of his medium.

" As a writer of fiction I go back through innumerable generations, to the teller of tales round the fire in the cavern that sheltered neolithic men," Maugham remarks in his autobiography and as most of his judgments about himself are, he has hit upon the right note. His genius lies in telling stories like Maupassant and the best way to do that is in the way of simple and touching tales. He has a genius in inventing plots and his art lies in the seeming artlessness of telling those stories. " I wanted to write stories," he tells us, " that proceeded, tightly knit, in an unbroken line from the exposition to the conclusion. I saw the short story as a narrative of simple event, material or spiritual, to which, by the elimination of everything that was not essential to its

[1] Preface, *Altogether*.

elucidation, a dramatic unity could be given. I preferred to end my stories with a full-stop rather than with a struggle of dots."[1] Maugham is inclined to simple tales told without digressions.

One has only to look at his short stories to get proofs of it. *Rain*, for example, is a simple tale about a militant clergyman who at last succumbs to the sin against which he has been fighting the whole of his life.[2] *Mayhew* is simpler still; it tells of a successful man who bought a house at Capri and settled there for the rest of his life, buried among books; it tells with a beautiful simplicity the story of a man who managed to make a simple and beautiful pattern in life.[3] It is no use multiplying examples; everyone of his stories is like that. That does not of course mean that he never uses the device of time-shift, that he always tells his story following the sequence of time. In that case he would have been regarded as a monotonous writer. He uses time-shift, but sparingly, just enough to serve his purpose; the conclusion arrived at in the case of his novels as regards his method of using time-shift applies with equal strength here too. The main theme is told as a simple tale. There are one or two stories that make us pause and hesitate, as, say, *Before the Party*. Mr. Ward considers *Before the Party* as Maugham's best story as it follows his idea about what a story should be, namely, "the symbol of a circle." The story tells how Millicent is pressed by her parents and sister to tell them how really her husband died. They were told before that it was a natural death. But her sister has heard recently from some of her friends that he had committed suicide. Millicent drops a bomb-shell; she has murdered her husband. Her father, who had pressed her before to tell them the facts of her husband's death and accused her for not telling the truth, now turns on her and

[1] *The Summing Up.*
[2] *The Trembling of a Leaf.*
[3] *Cosmopolitans.*

says, " I ought never to have been told. I think it was most selfish of you." At first it seems that the main theme is the story that Millicent tells but the author's aim is to lay stress on the attitude of her family, like that in *Cakes and Ale*. In *Before the Party* the reaction on the minds of the hearers of Millicent's story is the main theme.

In his short stories we find him making a merit of one of his limitations. He knows that he cannot write entirely objectively; he puts much of himself in his writings. This practice is developed in his short stories where the technique he adopts is mostly the use of the first person singular. In some cases he does not use the first person singular directly but substitutes a name for " I ". He has done that in *Rain*, for example, where, in the original sketch of the story, we find that he had intended to write in the first person singular. The short stories in the books *First Person Singular* and *Cosmopolitans* are all written in the first person singular; the rest of the short stories have been written in a method which is only a variation of that. In the case of his novels we have seen the gradual development of this device; in the case of his short stories we find the use of the completely developed device. It must be mentioned that in one or two of the stories he has not been able to keep the air of verisimilitude; we wonder, for example, how he could obtain the particulars of the scene between Mr. and Mrs. Albert Forrester and Mrs. Bulfinch in *The Creative Impulse*.[1] In other cases we can well believe that he got it somehow from some source or other, but in this case that would not do. Mrs. Albert Forrester at the end of the story intentionally conceals the facts of that interview and the narrator who could only know from that source naturally could not know the facts. Anyhow it is a rare slip; generally speaking Maugham has made a very successful use of this device.

[1] *First Person Singular.*

In his short stories just as in his novels we find the impress of his training as a dramatist. The stories begin at dramatic moments; incidents which develop the story are joined and stories are told without digressions in a concise manner. From the very beginning they demand the reader's attention and their greatest merit is that the interest never flags; that is what makes him one of the best story-tellers of England. He has followed a method, for which his training as a dramatist was a great asset, which has been followed by all the great story-tellers of the world. He imparts a sense of completeness, a perfect pattern which has always appealed to the reading public. Maugham's aim coincides with that of the great masters of short story, except perhaps Chekov; it coincides, for example, with that of Stephan Zweig. "Conciseness," remarks Zweig, "has always seemed to me to be the most essential problem in art. To fit his destiny to a man so nicely as to leave no vacuum, to inclose him as irradiantly as amber does the fly and yet the while to preserve every detail of his being, has, of all tasks, ever been the dearest to me."[1] Maugham has been very successful in attaining what Zweig reveals to be his aim.

V

The Source

One peculiar thing about Maugham is that the source of his plots is his characters and his characters he gets from real life. There is nothing strange in modelling one's characters on real personages; every writer does that. But the speciality of Maugham lies in the fact that the sketches he makes of the characters suggest the plots to him into which they can be fitted. This specially applies to his short stories.

[1] Foreword, *Kaleidoscope*.

We could never have guessed his method of writing stories if he had not told us himself. He tells us how he came to write the story *Rain*, in the preface to *Altogether* :

I was travelling from Honolulu to Pago-Pago and hoping they might at some time be of service, I jotted down, as usual, my impressions of such of my follow-passengers as attracted my attention. This is what I said of Miss Thompson : ' Plump, pretty in a coarse fashion, perhaps not more than twenty-seven. She wore a white dress and a large white hat, long white boots from which the calves bulged in cotton stockings.' There had been a raid on the Red Light District in Honolulu just before we sailed, and the gossip of the ship spread the report that she was making the journey to escape arrest. My notes go on : ' W. The missionary. He was a tall thin man, long limbs loosely jointed, he had hollow cheeks and high cheek bones..... He had cadaverous air and a look of suppressed fire.'

Maugham's notes on the wife of the missionary tells us of her extreme alertness. She told Maugham that W. was a missionary and that he never quailed to go long distances on even rough seas in a canoe to do a duty. " She spoke of the depravity of the natives in a voice which nothing could hush, but with a vehement, unctuous horror, telling me of their marriage customs which were obscene beyond description. She said, when they first went it was impossible to find a single good girl in any of the villages. She inveighed against dancing." Maugham tells us that he talked with the missionary and his wife but once, and with Miss Thompson not at all. But the opinions he formed about those people suggested to him a fine plot. Here is his note for the story :

A prostitute, flying from Honolulu after a raid, lands at Pago-Pago. There lands also a missionary and his wife. Also the narrator. All are obliged to stay there owing to an outbreak of measles. The missionary finding out her profession persecutes her. He reduces her to misery, shame and repentance ; he has no mercy on her. He induces the governor to order her return to Honolulu. One morning he is found with his throat cut by his own hand ; she is once more radiant and self-possessed. She looks at men and scornfully exclaims, " Dirty pigs."

The look of suppressed fire in the missionary, together with the stories told by his wife about his militant attitude towards

sin, suggested to Maugham the missionary's part in the story. Maugham did not like his attitude and his knowledge of the psychology, as taught by the modern school, told him that the missionary's militant attitude against sin may be due to a subconscious leaning towards it which may get the better of the conscious self at any moment; his fertile imagination did the rest.

"If you are a story-teller," he remarks elsewhere, "any curious person you meet has a way of suggesting a story, and incidents that to others will seem quite haphazard have a way of presenting themselves to you with the pattern your natural instinct has imposed on them." In *Rain* we find a typical illustration of that. Maugham's habit have always been to use his keen power of observation and jot down the characteristic of his fellow creatures that their look suggests to him and the incidents that suit such characters come naturally. The sketches contained in his book *On a Chinese Screen* are all fit to be developed into stories. Maugham remarks in the preface to that book, "This is not a book at all, but the material for a book." But what it contains is not material for one book but many books. *The Rolling Stone*, *The Cabinet Minister*, *The Servants of God*, *Fear*, etc., are all undeveloped or nearly developed stories. There is very little chance of these stories being developed but at least two of these sketches have provided Maugham with the foundations of his great novels, *The Painted Veil* and *The Narrow Corner*. We get a sketch of the original of the Mother Superior of *The Painted Veil* here :

> It was the Mother Superior who received me, a placid sweet-faced lady with a soft voice and an accent which told me that she came from the south of France. She showed me the orphans who were in her charge, busy at the lace-making which the nuns had taught them, smiling shyly; and she showed me the hospital where lay soldiers suffering from dysentery, typhoid, and malaria.....[1]

[1] *The Nun.*

> With pride they showed me their poor little chapel with its tawdry statue of the Blessed Virgin ; its paper flowers, and its gaudy shoddy decoration ; for those faithful hearts, alas ! were possessed of singularly bad taste. [1]

We get here the rough sketch of the nuns with their great heart, simplicity and ignorance, which was developed in *The Painted Veil*. The convent with the hospital where the soldiers are treated becomes the seat of a human drama for a time and occupies a large portion of the book. Maugham added Kitty, Walter, Townsend and a few other minor characters to it and connecting them built a plot. From the experience we have already had about Maugham's method we may safely guess that even those characters he took from life.

The same thing happens in the case of *The Narrow Corner*. The book depends a great deal on the character of Dr. Saunders, if not entirely, and the first sketch of him we get in *On a Chinese Screen*. The description runs thus :

> Dr. Saunders was a little greyhaired man, with a high colour and a snub nose which gave him a strangely impudent expression. He had a large sensual mouth and when he laughed, which he did very often, he showed decayed and discoloured teeth ; when he laughed his little blue eyes wrinkled in a curious fashion and then he looked the very picture of malice.....He was not on the register.....But it was evident that he was a very clever doctor and the Chinese had great faith in him. [2]

This is the basis on which Maugham built up that unique character which suggested to him the incidents. The doctor's sense of humour with the tang of mischievousness impressed the author. In the sketch itself we get a taste of Saunders's puckish humour and in *The Narrow Corner* this has been developed to its fullest possibilities.

This is Maugham's method of writing. In the last two cases, naturally, we cannot know how exactly Maugham connected different characters with the incidents as we have not been given the sketches of all the characters, which, the

[1] *The Sights of the Town.*

[2] *The Stranger.*

facts about *Rain* suggest, may be found in his notebook. But that this is the method is clearly revealed by the author in the case of *Rain*; and these hints about the source of characters and plots in *The Painted Veil* and *The Narrow Corner*, which we get in the sketches in *On a Chinese Screen*, are additional confirmations if they are not proofs by themselves.

CHAPTER V

The World of Somerset Maugham

I

Preliminary—the Ideas and Opinions which Help to Mould the People of Maugham's World

A writer generally sees his characters from a particular angle of vision. His characters often bear the impress of his temperament and opinions. "I have seen the world through my own idiosyncrasies," Maugham admits in *The Summing Up*. It will make it easier to understand Maugham's world if we first make an estimate of his idiosyncrasies.

We are not here to judge whether his ideas and opinions are right or not; we are concerned with them in so far as they have affected his work. One of such ideas is that "There is not much to choose between men. They are all a hotchpotch of greatness and littleness, of virtue and of vice, of nobility and baseness."[1] He has found that out as a result of experience. Trying to probe into a character he has often brought out its fundamental baseness and this has made people call him a cynic. His defence against that attack is a clear indication of his attitude towards his characters:

> I have been called cynical. I have been accused of making men out worse than they are. I do not think I have done this. All I have done is to bring into prominence certain traits that any writers shut their eyes to. I think what has chiefly struck me in human beings is their lack of consistency. I have never seen people all of a piece. It has amazed me that the most incongruous traits should exist in the same person and for all that yield a plausible harmony. I have often asked myself how characteristics,

[1] *The Summing Up.*

seemingly irreconcilable, can exist in the same person. I have known crooks who were capable of self-sacrifice, sneak-thieves who were sweet-natured and harlots for whom it was a point of honour to give good value for money. ..... The censure that has from time to time been passed on me is due perhaps to the fact that I have not expressly condemned what was bad in the characters of my invention and praised what was good. It must be a fault in me that I am not gravely shocked at the sins of others unless they personally affect me, even when they do I have learnt at last generally to excuse them..... I think I could be justly condemned if I saw only people's faults and were blind to their virtues..... There is nothing more beautiful than goodness and it has pleased me very often to show how much of it there is in persons who by common standards would be relentlessly condemned. I have shown it because I have seen it..... I am touched when I see the goodness of the wicked and I am willing enough to shrug a tolerant shoulder at their wickedness. I am not my brother's keeper.

This attitude of his has moulded his characters in a particular way. He has shown hidden baseness in apparently good people and drawn in bold relief the goodness of his wicked characters which have thus become more interesting.

One strange fact cannot but strike a reader of Maugham ; it is his preference for obscure characters. In his autobiography he has told us the reason for that :

I have been more concerned with the obscure than with the famous. They are more often themselves. They have had no need to create a figure to protect themselves from the world to impress it. Their idiosyncrasies have had more chance to develop in the limited circle of their activity and since they have never been in the public eye it has never occurred to them that they have anything to conceal. They display their oddities.....it has never struck them that they are odd..... The great man is too often all of a piece ; it is the little man that is a bundle of contradictory elements. He is inexhaustible. You never come to the end of surprise he has in store for you.

That is the reason of Maugham's characters being " little men " ; he has not in his novels any character whom he has represented to be a great man—a prominent statesman, for example.

Maugham, therefore, is interested in the 'little men' for their oddities, and paints his characters with one or more eccentricities. There is no normal man or woman in his works. In his opinion there is no such thing. He refers once to an incident of his student days in the medical school when one day his professor, observing him vainly trying to find out a certain nerve in its proper place, remarked, "You see the normal is the rarest in the world."

"And though he spoke of anatomy," Maugham tells us, "he might have spoken with equal truth of man. The casual observation impressed itself upon me as many a profounder one has not and all the years that have passed since then, with the increasing knowledge of human nature which they have brought, have only strengthened my conviction of its truth. I have met a hundred men who seemed perfectly normal, only to find in them presently an idiosyncrasy so marked as to put them almost in a class by themselves. It has entertained me not a little to discover the hidden oddities of men to all appearances most ordinary. I have been often amazed to come upon a hideous depravity in men who you would have sworn were perfectly commonplace. I have at last sought the normal man as a precious work of art." [1]

These views of the author we must take into consideration when we examine the people of Maugham's world.

II

The Types

Maugham in his autobiography sums up his experience of human character in a way which writers like Ben Jonson have done. He points out :

> One reads that no one exactly resembles anyone else, and that every man is unique, and in a way this is true, but it is a truth easy to exaggerate :

[1] *The Normal Man, On a Chinese Screen.*

in practice men are very much alike. They are divided into comparatively few types. The circumstances mould them in the same way.

At the very first glance at the world he has created, we find such distinct types—types that he finds in the real world.

The most distinct of the types is the typical Government official in the Malay Archipelago and the South Sea islands. They are generally in love with the country and the work they are engaged in and that is the common trait among them. Walker in *Mackintosh*, Morton in *Virtue*, Warburton in *The Outstation*, Gruyter in *The Vessel of Wrath*, and George Moon of *The Back of Beyond* are only a few of them. The next type of note is the bigoted clergyman like the Vicar of Blackstable in *Of Human Bondage*, Davidson of *Rain*, or Jones of *The Vessel of Wrath*. Then there are the snobs like Warburton in *The Outstation*, Clay of *Our Betters*, the Blands in *The Alien Corn*, etc.; the interesting rogues like Strickland in *The Moon and Sixpence*, Ginger Ted in *The Vessel of Wrath*, Nichols of *The Narrow Corner*; the characters who inspire awe and admiration like Dirk Stroeve of *The Moon and Sixpence*, Walter of *The Painted Veil*, Erik Christessen of *The Narrow Corner*, Sheppey of *Sheppey*.

His women can be divided into three main types. There are some devoted and constant wives like Ata in *The Moon and Sixpence*, or the Manchu princess in *The Painted Veil*. But these are very rare cases. Generally Maugham's women are hetairas whose prominent trait is sexual blandishment, such as Bertha Craddock in *Mrs. Craddock*, Rosie Driffield in *Cakes and Ale*, Luise Frith in *The Narrow Corner*, Julia in *Theatre*, etc.; as an extreme case of this type we have Mildred in *Of Human Bondage* who turns prostitute. Then there is the other type of woman, the motherly; Miss Ley of *Mrs. Craddock*, second Mrs. Driffield of *Cakes and Ale*, Sally of *Of Human Bondage*, Mrs. Frith of *The Narrow Corner*, etc., fall in this category. In them we find sympathy and kindness

which are their prominent traits as sex is the prominent trait in the other type.

These are the most prominent types among Maugham's characters. "The slightly abnormal circumstances," he shrewdly guesses, "in which men live in the countries where life is primitive or the environment alien to them, emphasize their ordinariness so that it gains a character of its own; and when they are in themselves extraordinary, which of course they sometimes are, the want of usual restraints permits them to develop their kinks with a freedom that in the more civilized communities can be hardly won."[1] But except in one or two cases (like that of Warburton in *The Outstation*) Maugham has not been very particular in showing kinks in only those people who live outside the restraints of civilization.

We can find types in every writer. Types occur again and again without any variation in mediocre writers. When a writer knows his business, he does not allow the same types to recur—he individualises them sufficiently to avoid giving an impression of monotony. Maugham knows his business. When we examine his characters minutely we find that no two characters are the same. There is always some diversity in apparent similarity. He has made every character unique.

III

Infinite Varieties

No one exactly resembles any one else in Maugham. There are the types but even a superficial probing reveals the fact that a character never recurs in Maugham. We shall examine the main types one by one. Let us take the typical Government officials first.

[1] *The Summing Up.*

Walker,[1] Morton[2] and Warburton[3] (to speak only of the characters already mentioned) have all the distinct stamp of the typical Government official on them. They all love the people they govern; all of them love the constructive works they are doing. But Walker is a cunning, coarse and jovial fellow; Morton is shy, just the opposite of Walker; and Warburton is a typical snob. Warburton is never jovial like Walker; he never demonstrates his love for the natives, he is stiff and formal. There is Townsend in *The Painted Veil* who does not resemble any of them in any trait except efficiency in doing his office work. He is a selfish man, vain and pleasure-seeking. Morton tries to win Margery because he is honestly infatuated by her but Townsend makes a conquest of Kitty to satisfy his egoistic, pleasure-seeking self. Then there is George Moon[4] who resembles Warburton slightly in his aloofness. But he is never so stiff; he is not a snob; moreover, he is tolerant, which Warburton is not. There is a number of such characters; but Maugham has never created two Government officials with the same ingredients. They all develop different kinks.

Maugham's clergymen are generally bigots; it is natural enough as they were almost all of them modelled on his uncle, the original of the Vicar of Blackstable. But there is always some shade of difference. Davidson[5] is a militant clergyman, full of fire which none of the other clergymen have. The Vicar of Blackstable[6] has a certain meanness and fear of death which mark him out from others. There is no sincerity in him; he makes a show of religious fervour. This cannot be said of the other clergymen. Davidson is anything

[1] *Mackintosh, The Trembling of a Leaf.*
[2] *Virtue, First Person Singular.*
[3] *The Outstation, Altogether.*
[4] *The Back of Beyond, Ah King.*
[5] *Rain, The Trembling of a Leaf.*
[6] *Of Human Bondage.*

but insincere (we must of course leave out the subconscious in him). Rev. Jones of *The Vessel of Wrath* has a sympathy for the sinners under his taciturnity and he takes it to be an unpleasant duty to press Gruyter to deport Ginger Ted. He is a Davidson but without his vindictiveness and with a great deal of humane feeling. Davidson thinks himself a flail of God and like Chesterton's clergyman in his story *The Flail of God*, takes upon himself the task of judging his fellow-creatures. He is obsessed with a peculiar conception of his religion and his duty to uphold it. He has forgotten the essence of his religion, pity, tolerance and forbearance, which overflowed in the Founder of his religion. He never really feels a trace of sympathy for Miss Thomson. But Jones is different. He wants to get Ginger Ted out of the island, not to punish him but just for the good of the natives, specially the girls who can never withstand Ted's advances. Moreover, Jones has one element in him which none of the other clergymen possess—it is humour, though not a very large quantity of it. " My sister is a determined woman," he says to Gruyter with a twinkle in his eyes, " From that night they spent on the island he never had a chance " (*i.e.*, of escaping).

Maugham's rogues are of a special brand (which is one of the reasons why he is not in favour with the purists). " A defect in my character is that I enjoy the company of those, however depraved, who can give me a Roland for my Oliver," he says in *The Moon and Sixpence* and that explains his preference for the pleasant rogues he has created, who are condemned by the general public. The common trait is that they are attractive in one way or other. Strickland has an unconcerned air and a peculiar sense of humour, Captain Nichols a quick wit, and Walker has a coarse humour of his own. But as in the case of other types, here too we never find any repetition. The three characters mentioned, who are prominent among his rogues, differ greatly from one another. These are characters whom Maugham likes but there are others

whom he admires—angelic characters like Dirk Stroeve,[1] Erik Christessen,[2] Sheppey,[3] Salvatore,[4] etc. They are so good that they never suspect anybody. But with their goodness are mixed other traits which make them different personalities. Dirk Stroeve is a buffoon and is laughed at. Erik Christessen has a romantic soul, but we never laugh at him. We wish with Ted Blake that there were some more like him. Sheppey is a character who is not passively good like others. He does not only think good of others, but like Christ, whose life he tries to follow, devotes his life to the good of others. Salvatore is the simplest of them ; he is the picture of an honest, simple soul, which is commoner on earth than the others.

It is the same story in the case of the other types. His hetairas, his mothers, his devoted wives, his snobs are types but the characters are individuals too. They are so much individualised that a superficial study fail to establish a similarity between, say, Bertha Craddock and Julia Lambert, Miss Ley and Sally, Thornton Clay and Warburton or Ata and the Manchu Princess of *The Painted Veil*. In the world of Somerset Maugham the typical and the individual characteristics are inextricably blended together and that is why they ring true.

IV

The Canvas and the Brush

An author's canvas is as difficult to work on as that of the painter. It is difficult in both cases to give full-length. three-dimensional portraits ; but it is no difficulty to a genius. He produces the illusion of completeness which is so satisfying. Maugham's characters are never cardboard characters,

[1] *The Moon and Sixpence.*
[2] *The Narrow Corner.*
[3] *Sheppey.*
[4] *Salvatore, Cosmopolitans.*

In his novels he builds up bit by bit characters which leave a lasting impression on the mind of the reader. He has created, for instance, Mildred in *Of Human Bondage* with her meanness and masochistic temperament, and with her lack of humour and sense of decency and gratitude, gradually with the help of episodes. There, however, he gets the opportunity of utilising hundreds of pages to unfold the character. In his short stories, and more so in his dramas, he has to condense; he cannot get so much space. Still in *Mackintosh*, for example, he has time to impart a lasting impression of Walker's coarse humour, his cunning, his love for the natives and his great heart. Even in such stories he gets some space. But there are short stories he has written which cover only three or four pages and it is there that we find his mastery of the brush displayed to the greatest extent. There he cannot show all the sides of a character, he can only lay stress on one or two of the dominating traits. Still he has to produce the illusion of completeness; he has to make them three-dimensional by showing one or two of the dimensions only. Take for instance *The Promise.*[1] Maugham paints there a character in Elizabeth Varmont who has always been unfaithful to her series of husbands and has entered the divorce court many times, but who sticks to her promise to Peter, whom she loves, that he would have his release whenever he wanted it. She generously offers to provide him with the grounds for divorcing her so that he may marry Barbara Canton with whom he has fallen in love. Within the short space allowed to him by the *Cosmopolitan Magazine* Maugham has successfully given the impression of a strong, honest, upright and sweet woman. The illusion of completeness is intact.

In novels and short stories, however, the author can put in his own comments and thus has an advantage over the dramatist in filling up a character. Maugham as a playwright

[1] *The Cosmopolitana.*

has to depend on bold touches to materialise a character and he comes out as successful as in his novels and short stories. In *The Circle*, for instance, he gives a skeleton of Arnold's character in the first half a dozen lines. He is irritated by slight causes such as an almost imperceptible disorder in the arrangement of the chairs. A few incisive lines tell us all about Lady Kitty, her shallowness, her ignorance, her self-complacent vanity:

> Lady Kitty. I think it is a beautiful chair.
> Porteous. What do you call it, Hepplewhite ?
> Arnold. No, Sheraton.
> Lady Kitty. Oh, I know. "The School for Scandal."

Again,—

> Lady Kitty. (Touching Elizabeth's frock) Callot ?
> Elizabath. No, Worth.
> Lady Kitty. I knew it was either Worth or Callot.

Four words have been enough for Maugham to reveal the tender side of two characters:

> Teddie. Elizabeth ?
> Elizabeth. What ?
> Teddie. Bless you.
> Elizabeth. Idiot.

There cannot be a greater mastery over brush shown. Naturally, Maugham has to deal with the predominating traits of the characters but he takes care that the characters seem like real people with three dimensions and not made up of Jonsonian humours.

From the very first Maugham had been very steady with the brush. Even in *Liza of Lambeth* we never get any fault in the character drawing, they never seem improbable. The characters have been drawn by a bold and steady hand ; Tom with his timid, sweet and forgiving nature, Liza with her bubbling life growing gradually lifeless under the sneers of her neighbours, Jim with his animal vigour and sensuality, boldness and certain sense of honour and responsibility (unlike

Townsend of *The Painted Veil*), stand before us full length and with sound limbs. When we compare those early novels with his mature works, however, we find a subtle difference. His first products were traced in broad lines; he had not yet had the experience of the different strata that may be found in a character. Liza, Tom or Jim are made of one piece; it is the same case with Alec of *The Explorer* and in fact with the characters in all the novels up to *Of Human Bondage*. Even in *Of Human Bondage* we find characters made of one piece; there are no contradictory elements shown in most of the characters. Philip is good, there is no baseness shown in him, so also in the case of Thorpe Athelny. Mildred is detestable and we do not get any redeeming feature in her. But there are one or two minor characters like Cronshaw or Fanny who are not of one piece like the rest. Cronshaw is wise but he never follows his wisdom. He is shrewd, yet in some matters he is foolish. In him, weakness of will counteracts his wisdom. Fanny, with her ill temper and the love she hides in her breast for Philip, is another such problem. But still we do not yet get a striking contrast of contradictory elements as we get, say, in Burton in *A Friend in Need.*[1] He is described as "one of the best" by those who know him. But as the author says in the story "we are a haphazard bundle of inconsistent qualities." The chief thing that struck the narrator was Burton's kindliness; but a story which he got out of him made him modify his opinion a little. Once a man came to Burton for employment. Burton told him that he would give him work if he succeeded in swimming across a strong current which he himself had done in youth. He knew that the man had ruined his constitution by drink and dissipation and that "the current round the beacon was more than he could manage" and he admitted at last that he had no vacancy in his office. No wonder the narrator was a trifle shocked.

[1] *Cosmopolitans.*

Or take another, say, Nichols in *The Narrow Corner*. He is shrewd and bold. He is not afraid of any person, neither does he turn a hair when he faces death on an angry sea ; but he has a superstitious awe of his wife who finds him out wherever he hides himself ; he turns green when at last he sees her coming up the stairs of a restaurant in Singapore where he is talking with Dr. Saunders.

This difference in portraiture is due to his mature expereience of human beings. He was not aware before of the different strata in a person. He dealt then with the superficial. " I had not yet learnt, " he says in *The Moon and Sixpence*, " how contradictory is human nature ; I did not know how much pose there is in the sincere, how much baseness in the noble, nor how much goodness in the reprobate " ; " I expected then people to be more of a piece than I do now, and I was distressed to find so much vindictiveness in so charming a creature. I did not realise how motley are the qualities that go to make up a human being. Now I am well aware that pettiness and grandeur, malice and charity, hatred and love, can find place side by side in the same human heart." It is the result of the experience he had by travels and we get the products of this experience in a marked manner from about the period *The Moon and Sixpence* was written. Mrs. Strickland, Blanche Stroeve and Dirk Stroeve in that book are such bundles of contradictions. After that not only we get a series of characters who are at the very first glance revealed to be made up of contradictory elements but we seldom get characters which are otherwise.

There are critics who have complained of Maugham's lack of pity. Harold Williams, for example, in his book *Modern English Writers*, says of Maugham that " he does not appear to have acquired a strong sympathy with human beings." Such a remark only shows how superficial a critic can be. Maugham's slightly cynical attitude makes the critics judge like that. They think apparently that sentimentality

is the best expression of pity. If they had triedto look into the attitude of Maugham, it would not have been difficult for them to change their opinion. Beneath such cynical attitude is always a deeply flowing stream of pity. We find it in abundance in his first novel. When he bitterly portrays the callousness of Mrs. Kemp and others at the time of Liza's death, we are reminded of Hood's lines,

" One more unfortunate
Weary of breath,
Rashly importunate,
Gone to her death !"

The brush which paints such scenes cannot be unsympathetic.

In fact Maugham has painted his world with a great deal of sympathy but his apathy to sentimentality gives it a coating of cynicism. His world is made up of characters whose oddness gives them the individuality they possess ; the Thorpe Athelnies, [1] the Walters, [2] the Dirk Stroeves, [3] the Nicholses, [4] the Edward Barnards, [5] the Elizabeth Vermonts, [6] the Louises, [7] and others live in the reader's mind for their oddities. But they are never unsympathetically painted. Maugham seldom is unsympathetic to human failings (except in one or two cases like that of say Townsend in *The Painted Veil*). The complaint against him is due probably to the fact that he has not painted in crimson the miseries of people, like Galsworthy, Gissing and others. But sympathy and pity cannot be expected to take the same channel of expression always. In Maugham's case at first the channel was an attitude of cynicism which afterwards gave place to that of uncommon tolerance. [8]

[1] *Of Human Bondage.*
[2] *The Painted Veil.*
[3] *The Moon and Six pence.*
[4] *The Narrow Corner.*
[5] *The Fall of Edward Bernard, The Trembling of a Leaf.*
[6] *The Promise, Cosmopolitans.*
[7] *Louise, Cosmopolitans.*
[8] *Vide* Chapter VII, " In Quest of Peace."

CHAPTER VI

The Spirit of Puck

" My agents pressed me to write humorously but for this I had no aptitude," Maugham modestly admits in his autobiography. But it is difficult to reconcile this statement with the fact that he has written " roaringly funny " [1] plays like *Jack Straw*. The explanation lies in the peculiar quality of Maugham's humour. It is better appreciated by an audience than a reader. It is better ' acted ' than read.

This is the reason why his novels do not seem to be as full of humour as his plays seem to the audience. There are scenes in his novels which reveal the humorous dramatist but a reader without a keen sense of the ridiculous may be expected to exclaim like Fred Blake, " What's there to laugh at ! " [2] Let us take a little scene from his latest novel *Theatre*. Julia is very much hurt because her husband is rather cold.

> She throws her hands to heaven.
>
> " I might be squint-eyed and hump-backed. I might be fifty. Am I so unattractive as all that ? It's so humiliating to have to beg for love. Misery, misery. "
>
> " That was a very good movement, dear. As if you were throwing a cricket ball. Remember that," says Michael.

Only good acting can bring out the humour of the scene fully. Here is another scene from the same book. Julia is angry because Langton has managed to get rid of Michael by providing him with a contract in America.

[1] Sir John Squire, *Illustrated London News*, Feb. 12, 1938.

[2] *The Narrow Corner*.

Julia goes up to him and stares into his eyes searchingly.

"Have you done all this to get me to stay on for another year? Have you broken my heart and ruined my whole life just to keep me in your rotten Theatre?"

"I swear I haven't.....Damn it, I would not play you a dirty trick like that."

"You liar, you filthy liar."

"I swear it is the truth."

"Prove it then," she said violently.

"How can I prove it? You know I'm decent really."

"Give me fifteen pounds a week and I'll believe you."

It is not that we do not get amused when we read them but the fact is that the stage could have done better justice to such scenes; they could have made the audience roar. A scene from *Of Human Bondage* and another from the *The Explorer* will make this point clear. Here is a scene from the daily life in the Hospital where Philip worked.

Once a woman came who was a member of the ballet at a famous music hall. She looked fifty, but gave her age as twenty-eight. She rolled her eyes round the young men, with a long sweep of her painted eyelashes, and flashed her yellow teeth at them. She spoke with a cockney accent but with an affectation of refinement which made every word a feast of fun.

"It's what they call a winter cough," Dr. Tyrell tells her gravely. "A great many middle-aged women have it."

"Well I never! That is a nice thing to say to a lady. No one ever called me middle-aged before." She opened her eyes wide and cocked her head on one side looking at him with indescribable archness.

"That is the disadvantage of our profession," said he. "It forces us sometimes to be ungallant." She took the prescription and gave him one last, luscious smile.

"You will come and see me dance, dearie, won't you?"

"I will indeed."

The scene from *The Explorer* tells us how Dick Lomas and Julia Crowley get engaged.

" Well," says Dick, " I can't suffer the humiliation of another refusal. Why don't you propose to me ?"

" What cheek !" she cried.

. . . . . .

" Well ?" he said.

" I shan't," she answered.

" Then I shall continue to be a brother to you."

She got up and curtsied.

" Mr. Lomas, I am a widow, twenty-nine years of age, and extremely eligible. My maid is a treasure, and my dressmaker is charming. I'm clever enough to laugh at your jokes and not so learned as to know where they come from."

" Really you are very long-winded. I said it all in four words."

" You evidently put it too briefly, since you were refused," she smiled.

She stretched out her hands and he took them.

" I think I'll do it by post," she said. " It'll sound so much more becoming."

" You'd better get it over now."

" You know I don't really want to marry you a bit. I'm only doing it to please."

" I admire your unselfishness."

" You will say yes if I ask you ?"

" I refuse to commit myself."

" Obstinate beast," she cried.

She curtsied once more, as well as she could since he was firmly holding her hands.

" Sir, I have the honour to demand your hand in marriage."

He bowed elaborately.

" Madam, I have much pleasure in acceding to your request."

A good actress could have made the ogling of the impudent music-hall artist very amusing. The elaborate curtsies of Julia and Dick would have looked wonderfully comic to a twentieth-century audience. The scene in *Theatre* in which Julia Lambert mimics Lydia Mayne alone in her room fails to bring any smile to the reader. " Julia began to speak in Lydia's voice, with the lazy drawl that made every remark she uttered sound faintly obscene." A reader has every difficulty in imagining this scene. But it would have been a

howling scene in a theatre, provided, of course, there could be found an actress to act that.

When we examine his plays, it is not difficult to see why he has so long fascinated the London audience which likes a good laugh. Barret Clark tells a story how the director found in the rehearsal of *Lady Frederick* that " it was necessary to delete many lines which would be sure to arouse laughter because too many laughs in quick succession might destroy the continuity of the action. " [1] Whether this anecdote be true or not, it does justice to Maugham's almost uncanny power of amusing his audience which has drawn an unwilling admiration even from a critic like Sawyer. [2]

In *The Circle* we find the best expression of this power of Maugham ; what was too flashy has been toned down by a mature hand, what was only a cluster of verbal fencing, quips and jests, now deepens into a more genuine laughter. The drama opens with the exhibition of an oddity in a person which never fails to amuse. And a caricature, as is only natural, shines better on the stage than on paper. When we read the first few lines of the drama they look rather colourless.

(Arnold comes and slightly alters the position of one of the chairs and addresses the footman.)

Arnold. George, who is supposed to look after this room ?

George. I don't know, Sir.

Arnold. I wish, when they dust, they'd take care to replace the things exactly as they were before.

Apparently there is nothing humorous in a man's just exasperation but the footman's unperturbedness shows off Arnold's idiosyncrasy—his proneness to be irritated at trifles—in a manner which cannot but amuse the audience. The audience is at once put into a laughing vein and is prepared for the other tricks which Maugham has up his sleeve.

[1] *A Study of Contemporary Drama.*

[2] *The Comedy of Manners from Sheridan to Maugham.*

Verbal badinage is another thing that helps to keep up the atmosphere of fun and laughter in *The Circle*. The play is full of it. Here are some of them:

Elizabeth. Damn.

Arnold. (Good humouredly) I wish you would not say that Elizabeth.....I should have thought you could say " Oh bother " or something like that.

Elizabeth. But that would not express my sentiments. Besides at the speech day, when you were giving away the prizes, you said there were no synonyms in the English language.

Arnold. There are no synonyms in the English language.

Elizabeth. In that case, I shall be regretfully forced to continue to say damn whenever I feel like it.

Another :

Clive. How old are you ?
Elizabeth. Twenty-five.
Clive. I'm never cross with a woman under thirty.
Elizabeth. Oh, then I've got ten years.
Clive. Mathematics ?
Elizabeth. No. Paint.

They amuse even a reader; but it is very easy to imagine how such sallies of wit when spoken sharply, with the additional advantages of expression with the face and movements, can become more amusing.

There are other means which Maugham has employed to infuse mirth into his audience. He has created a jolly person like Elizabeth whose mirth is infectious. The other method, that of caricature, we shall deal with presently in detail.

One of the easiest methods by which a humorous writer can amuse his admirers is caricature. It has always been found to be infallible. But there is caricature and caricature. There is a kind of caricature which is meant to be a caricature, a presentation of obvious deformities of body or of mind, which generally tends to become malicious and reveal a certain coarseness of mind on the part of the writer. This coarseness appeals

to the mind of a coarse reader or a coarse audience ; but a cultured man cannot appreciate it. The best caricature is the good-humoured caricature, a caricature done by giving a good-natured twist when depicting a character. It does not arouse the boisterous mirth which the first kind of caricature does ; the reader or the audience, specially when they are cultured people, smile at the caricature presented but they smile with sympathy. A coarse man will laugh to see a man tumble through no fault of his ; it is mirth of this nature that is roused by the first kind of caricature. " It is another thing," as Bergson remarks, " to tumble because you were intent upon a star. It was certainly a star at which Don Quixote was gazing. " [1] A cultured reader's heart goes to Don Quixote though he may laugh at him. This is the best kind of caricature. We never feel any repulsion for such a character though we do so in the case of the first sort. In Maugham we find both and an examination of that reveals an interesting development of his mind.

In his first novel, *Liza of Lambeth*, Mrs. Kemp is a caricature of the first type. She is oblivious of everything except her own interest and what is strange is that " her own interest " does not include her daughter. She is always complaining about her gout and thus does not fail to be a little funny, but it is a caricature of the worst type and when Maugham paints the selfish woman rejoicing that she had insured Liza and so would not suffer any material loss we feel disgusted. Mrs. Kemp does not supply an innocent unadulterated mirth. In *Mrs. Craddock* we have a caricature of the worthless country nobility, the set including Mr. Bacot, General Hancock, Mrs. Branderton and others ; Miss Glover is also the caricature of a prudish, bigoted woman. We can feel Maugham's malicious amusement in such caricatures ; we find that also in his hit at the general British public which swallows Edward

[1] *Laughter.*

Craddock's sentimental election stunt. In his great novel *Of Human Bondage*, too, we find traces of such malicious caricature,—in his depiction of the narrow-minded Vicar of Blackstable, the picture of his school life including the ignorant and narrow-minded teachers, and in the character of Heyward. But here we find an inkling of the change in Maugham's mind. In Heyward we find a worthless, shallow character, but Maugham does not give the impression that Heyward is absolutely disgusting as would have been very easy and natural to do; Maugham manages to make the reader feel, if not sympathy, at least a little tolerance.

It must be noted that all of these caricatures are not amusing; some of them are satirical pictures without the least attempt at humour. This is due to a mood of bitterness in Maugham's mind which changes with his maturity.

To this period belongs the satirical play *Our Betters*; Maugham has been merciless to the foppish dandies like Clay who take scrupulous care about their dress and accent. The general tone of the play is of merciless caricature. It is of course not quite right to identify the tone of a play with the mood of the dramatist. A dramatist has to look to his audience. What with the effect of the Boer War and what with the rise of the school of Shaw the satirical plays came into vogue in the beginning of this century; and if this play had been an isolated piece we would have been bound to judge it as a drama *à la mode*. But it is not an isolated piece; it fits in, with the similar plays that had preceded, with a distinct attitude of Maugham which we also find in his novels. The Maugham of this period has a bitter and unsatisfied mind.

But gradually this changes and Maugham learns to take a tolerant view of people. In 1919 Maugham produced *Rain* and *Moon and Sixpence*, and these two reveal the two currents flowing in his mind. Davidson in *Rain* is a satirical caricature but Dirk Stroeve in *The Moon and Sixpence* is a sympathetic caricature; he resembles Don Quixote. He can never think

ill of other people and for that he suffers ; his eyes are fixed at the stars, that is why he stumbles. A coarse mind finds him a butt of ridicule ; he is a buffoon. Once when he describes with realistic details how he had taken a purge his wife is disgusted with his childishness:

> " You seem to like making a fool of yourself," she says.
>
> Dirk Stroeve is dismayed and answers, " Sweetheart, have I vexed you ? I'll never take another. It was only because I was bilious. I lead a very sedentary life. I don't take enough exercise. For three days I hadn't....."

Indeed his foolishness cannot but incite laughter. But our heart goes out to him even when we are laughing at his foolish childishness. Maugham has created a fool whose foolishness is very touching. This heralds a distinct change in Maugham. From now on his caricatures are never bitter ; they are solely for the sake of amusement. Of course we cannot expect to find the appeal to the heart in every one of such funny portraits, but what we find is that the sting has been taken away, there is no further satirical motive. In *The Circle* we find two caricatures, one in Arnold and another in Lady Kitty; but the idiosyncrasies of Arnold, as has already been pointed out, supply pure amusement and so does the complacent ignorance of Lady Kitty. Here is a specimen of her usual conversation which reveals mplahercent mind:

> Lady Kitty. I think it's a beautiful chair.
> Porteous. What do you call it, Hepplewhite ?
> Arnold. No, Sheraton.
> Lady Kitty. Oh I know. " The School for Scandal."

But she is purely an object of fun and not repulsion. Miss Jones [1] is another typical case with her idea of virtue, modesty, chastity and sense of propriety : she is a funny figure. But the reader is never made to sneer at Miss Jones, as he was

[1] *The Vessel of Wrath, Altogether.*

made to in the case of Miss Glover in *Mrs. Craddock*. Miss Glover has a heart of gold, yet her prudishness prevents us from fully sympathising with her ; we suspect that the author finds her prudishness rather disgusting. But Miss Jones has been pictured by a different Maugham, from a mature, tolerant point of view, and whenever she bristles up with her sense of virtue, the reader is made to smile good-naturedly. The same is the case with " the celebrated Mortimer Ellis," the bigamist in *Round Dozen*[1]. Mortimer Ellis never disgusts the reader nor makes him indignant, even when he succeeds in achieving his ambition of marrying for the twelfth time. He is only an amusing figure, and has been portrayed just to supply fun for " a hundred days " to the reading public as the author admits in the preface to *First Person Singular*. The narrator finds that he does not entirely dislike Mr. Kelada, the Mr. Know-all as he is nicknamed, though he has a discursive habit and has been represented to have disgusted all the people on board the ship.[2] In his recent novel *Theatre* he has indulged in another caricature in Michael who is very vain of his beauty. Even when he has a sagging belly and a double chin, he draws in his belly and throws out his chin whenever he is complimented on his beauty. But he supplies pure fun and this is entirely different from the caricature in Mrs. Kemp. There is no touch of malice or resentment here. " When nature produces a buffoon," the author remarks once, " he is a fair game and he has no just cause for complaint if the novelist to the best of his ability presents him as he is for the entertainment of his generation." [3] There is no ulterior motive now other than entertainment.

Side by side with the decrease of Maugham's satirising tendency and the increase of genial tolerant humour we find him adopting another method of amusing his readers and

[1] *First Person Singular*.
[2] *Mr. Know-all, Cosmopolitans*.
[3] Preface, *First Person Singular*.

audiences; he begins to create more and more characters who radiate mirth and joy. In the first few novels and plays we do not get such characters. The first appearance of such characters is in *The Explorer*. There we meet a pair of jolly people in Dick Lomas and Mrs. Crowley, who are joined together in bonds of matrimony quite befittingly. Such characters appear more and more as Maugham becomes tolerant and the bitterness leaves his mind. Strickland is the beginning of a series of characters whose very roguishness provides a source of humour. The narrator frankly tells Strickland that he is a cad. "Now that you've that off your chest, let's go and have dinner," replies Strickland.[1] One cannot but be amused by such a character. He is not exactly jolly as the others that follow are, but in him we get the seed of a Nichols. Walker,[2] Waddington,[3] Gruyter,[4] are attempts at drawing such characters the best example of which we find in Dr. Saunders and more so in Captain Nichols of *The Narrow Corner*. There are other characters portrayed, whose jollity is not due to their roguishness but due to bubbling life in them; such characters are Elizabeth of *The Circle*, Rosie Driffield of *Cakes and Ale* and Julia of *Theatre*.

We have discussed how the peculiar quality of his humour makes it more effective on stage than when read. But that does not mean that he is never humorous in his novels and short stories. We have already discussed some humorous scenes and bits of conversation which are quite amusing even when they are read, though of course they are more effective on the stage. As he grows mature Maugham succeeds in becoming very amusing to his readers, whenever he wants to do that. One of the methods he becomes master of, is that of amusing situations. When Maugham describes

[1] *The Moon and Sixpence.*
[2] *Mackintosh, The Trembling of a Leaf.*
[3] *The Painted Veil.*
[4] *The Vessel of Wrath.*

the story of a luncheon which he took with a lady, who professed never to take " more than one thing for luncheon " and ate up food to the value of nearly eighty gold francs, it cannot but make one chuckle.[1] There are a number of such humorous stories depending on situations : stories like *The Closed Shop*,[2] *The Wash Tub*,[3] *The Creative Impulse*,[4] etc., give ample proof of the author's power of inventing humorous situation.

In his latest novels, *Cakes and Ale*, *The Narrow Corner* and *Theatre*, we find him a full-fledged humorist. These are full of the humorous sallies of which he has become a master. Here is a bit of conversation between Captain Nichols and Dr. Saunders :

Dr. Saunders. " Socrates suffered the same sort of affliction (domestic unhappiness) but I never heard that it affected his digestion."

" Who was 'e ?"

" An honest man."

" Much good it did him, I lay."

" In point of fact it did not."

" You've got to take things as you find them, I say, and if you're too particular your won't get anywhere."

What makes *The Narrow Corner* so full of humour, is the presence of this priceless pair in it. Dr. Saunders looks at everything from an Olympian height with a tolerant eye and finds fun in life itself. Nichols with his eternal complaint about his dyspepsia and his roguishness is a constant source of humour. Roguery is a thing which never fails to amuse any generation ; we have only to look at the gallery of such pleasant rogues as Falstaff, Jack Wilton,[5] Brainworm, Scapin,[6] Gil Blas,[7] to get the proof of it.

[1] *The Luncheon, Cosmopolitans.*

[2] *Cosmopolitans.*

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] *Altogether.*

[5] Thomas Nashe, *Jack Wilton* or *The Unfortunate Traveller.*

[6] Moliere, *Cheats of Scapin.*

[7] Le Sage, Alain René, *Gil Blas de Santillane.*

Dr. Saunders finds his whole life a bit of fun, but in *The Narrow Corner* Maugham does not succeed in imparting that sense. He does that in his latest novel *Theatre*. He presents everything in a comic manner. Love's painful aspects, which helped to create the gloomy atmosphere of *Of Human Bondage*, turn into a comic affair. Maugham is able now to look at life as a disinterested spectator and from his height can see things in a way which is not possible to the actors in the drama of life. Maugham has succeeded in following the advice of Bergson :

> Now step aside and look upon life as a disinterested spectator ; many a drama will turn into comedy.....[1]

A reader of *Theatre* remains in no doubt about the truth of the self-revealing statement of Maugham that he is a " humorist by profession." [2]

[1] *Laughter.*

[2] *The Traitor, Ashenden.*

CHAPTER VII

In Quest of Peace

I

The Pessimist

"What is life?" asked Count Leo Tolstoy [1];
"What, without asking, hither hurried whence?
And, without asking, whither hurried hence?," asked the eastern philosopher Omar Khayyam, and as Dr. Saunders in *The Narrow Corner* points out, "ever since men picked up a glimmer of intelligence in the primeval forests, they've been asking those questions." Thinkers of all ages and of all countries have tried to fathom the mystery of life and find some answer to these troubling problems. Some like A. L. Barbauld have never tried to go much deeper than what they see :

> Life! I know not what thou art,
> But know that thou and I must part.

But greater intellects are not satisfied with such simplicity and have tried to understand the meaning of 'Life.' And their feeling about life has sometimes (indeed, more often than not) been pessimistic :

> Told by an idiot full of sound and fury
> Signifying nothing.

—and sometimes been optimistic. In the nineteenth century the feeling about life tended to be optimistic. Browning felt :

> God's in his Heaven—
> All's right with the World.[2]

[1] *A Confession and What I Believe.*
[2] Browning, *Pippa Passes.*

Such was also the attitude of Tennyson,[1] and Tennyson only echoed the general attitude of the age. But even amid such contentment we find the note of rebellion in writers like Thomas Hardy; Angel Clare[2] parodies Browning's lines:

> God is not in his Heaven—
> And all's wrong with the World.

Hardy's novels, and most of his poems too, are steeped in this spirit all through and from this standpoint, if not from any other, he can be said to have heralded the twentieth century. It was becoming increasingly apparent from the last decade of the nineteenth century that the whole structure of Victorian beliefs was crumbling down. Intellectuals were beginning to ask questions. They were not satisfied with taking things at their face value and with the explanation of everything by accepting a benevolent and loving God as an axiomatic truth. The biology of Darwin had already given God's well-established seat in Heaven a shake from which it hardly ever recovered.

This was not the only thing the intellectuals began to question; they also began to look askance at the existing state of society. This has always been done by the outstanding intellects of every age; but now this dissatisfaction, which began with the intellectuals, spread quickly among the common masses as a result of the disastrous Boer War. These shattered the commoners' faith in the aristocracy and their rulers whose rights they had so long recognised unquestioned. One thing leads to another; the ball once set in motion went on rolling and thus the age of contentment gave place to the "Age of Interrogation." It was amid such general dissatisfaction, spiritual and material, that Somerset Maugham took up the profession of writing as a serious vocation.

[1] "And all is well, tho' faith and form
Be sunder'd in the night of fear." (*In Memoriam.*)

[2] *Tess D'Urbervilles.*

As was only natural, Maugham, too, began to rend the veil of sham concealing the real state of things from the contented Victorian eyes. But he took a different road from Bernard Shaw. While Shaw is an active social reformer, cudgelling society with a view to bringing about a better order of things, Maugham has a more detached manner contemplating men and things with something like philosophic irony.

Maugham informs us in his autobiography that he learnt at least one thing from the elementary science taught in the medical school. He gathered the idea that everything conforms to the laws of nature and man is no exception. " I believed that we were wretched puppets at the mercy of a ruthless fate ; and that, bound by the inexorable laws of nature, we were doomed to take part in the ceaseless struggle for existence with nothing to look forward to but inevitable defeat." He had a vague idea of this nature before, but it was this knowledge of science that made it more distinct. " I was violently pessimistic, " he admits now, but from his first novel *Liza of Lambeth*, written when he was still a medical student, we do not get exactly that impression. We do not get the poignant note that we find later in *Of Human Bondage*. We cannot but suspect that though he has intellectually taken up this attitude of pessimism, he does not yet whole-heartedly feel it. We do not get here the impress of a despairing soul, the utmost we can get is the humane sympathy of the author for the miseries and sufferings of the people, which he had witnessed in course of his medical duties in Lambeth.

We see pessimism, that was a mere seed in his first novel, develop to its fullest growth in *Of Human Bondage*. Between this book and *Liza of Lambeth* he wrote about a dozen plays and novels but in none of them we get the true impress of the author ; he was trying to be popular and he was developing his medium ; he was a little mechanical, his soul had very little opportunity of coming out in an inspired moment. *Of Human Bondage* is the first book he wrote under inspiration,

feeling an uncontrollable urge from within. This book is the record of the disturbance which Maugham was feeling in his soul.

" What is the meaning of all these sufferings ?", he had been asking himself for many years. In search for an answer Maugham began to study the philosophers, classical and modern, of the East and of the West ; but they only made him a more confirmed pessimist. He went to them for an answer which would make him happy. But he could not believe in *Karma* which could have given him what he wanted. He wanted something positive to take away from him the thoughts that troubled him ; he has given a clear idea of the restless state of his mind in *Of Human Bondage*. Philip, there, is the projection of Maugham himself. Philip thinks :

> What is the use of it ?
>
> The effort was so incommensurate with the result. The bright hopes of youth had to be paid for at such a bitter price of disillusionment. Pain and disease and unhappiness weighed down the scale so heavily. What did it all mean ? He thought of his own life, the high hopes with which he had entered upon it, the limitations which his body forced upon him, his friendlessness, and the lack of affection which had surrounded his youth. He did not know that he had ever done anything but what seemed best to do, and what a cropper he had come ! Other men, with no more advantages than he, succeeded, and others again, with many more, failed. It seemed pure chance. The rain falls alike upon the just and upon the unjust and for nothing was there a why and a wherefore.

Cronshaw, the poet, had presented Philip with a piece of Persian carpet as an answer to Philip's questions about the meaning of life ; " you shall have to find the answer yourself," he had added with that present. And Philip finds that answer one day on the streets of London, after being disappointed as a painter, bruised in love, tossed roughly in a blanket by whimsical fortune and compelled to become a shop-walker to escape starving. Suddenly the answer occurred to him :

> The answer was obvious. Life had no meaning. On the earth, satellite of a star speeding through space, living things had arisen under the

influence of conditions which were part of the planet's history ; and as there had been a beginning of life upon it, so, under influence of other conditions, there would be an end ; man, no more significant than other forms of life, had come not as the climax of creation but as a physical reaction to the environment.....There was no meaning in life, and man by living served no end. It was immaterial whether he was born or not born, whether he lived or ceased to live. Life was insignificant and death without consequence."

Maugham has become at this stage convinced of the insignificance of human beings. They cannot influence their actions. They are bound hand and foot. " The illusion of free will is so strong in my mind," says Philip, " that I can't get away from it, but I believe it is only an illusion..... Before I do anything I feel that I have a choice, and that influences what I do ; but afterwards, when the thing is done, I believe that it was inevitable from all eternity." Maugham would not have felt so strongly about it if he could believe in the philosophy of *Karma* or in God, whom he had long ago taken to be " a hypothesis that a reasonable man must reject. "[1] But he could not, and as a result, we find him believing in " the meaninglessness of pain which is pessimism's unanswered argument." Philip finds that life weaves a pattern but it has no meaning just as the pattern on the Persian carpet. Philip remembers the story of the Eastern king, who ordered a sage to prepare a history of man and the sage at the death-bed of the king brought the essence of the history of man ; it was this :

He was born, he suffered and he died.

We find that in *Of Human Bondage* Maugham shows a conviction in the stark realities of the world, otherwise he could not be such a pessimist. If one can convince himself with the Eastern philosopher that—

.....in and out, above and below
It is nothing but a Magic Shadow show
Played in a Box whose candle is the Sun,
Round which we Phantom Figures come and go—[2]

[1] *The Summing Up.*
[2] Fitzerald, *Omar Khayyam.*

the whole basis of pessimism would have gone; man could have laughed at suffering as it is a mere "Shadow show"; it would have seemed to him foolishness to cry over a piece of unreality. To some extent Maugham's life resembles Philip's, a record of disillusionment and suffering. At the time of writing the book, he informs us in his autobiography, he was feeling very tired and disgusted with the world. And he conceived an idea how to find peace and happiness. "I conceived these notions," he says, "when I was still at work on *Of Human Bondage* and turning my wishes into fiction, as writers will, towards the end of it I drew a picture of the marriage I should have liked to make."[1] He thought he could find happiness in a marriage with a girl like Sally, steady, hard-working and tender, always looking to his comforts in her quiet way. This is, however, also a passing fancy in Maugham's mind.

II

The Shadow of a Utopia

"Life weaves a meaningless pattern," is the conclusion that Maugham arrived at in *Of Human Bondage*; but we have seen that at the end of that book he came to the conclusion that it is not a bad idea to make that pattern beautiful. How to make it so, is the question that troubles him now. When writing *Of Human Bondage* he had one fancy and now he has another, a more clearly conceived one.

The hardships of the life of an Intelligence Officer in the War told on his health, and as he did not have any more work to do for the time being, he took the opportunity of withdrawing himself for some time. He began travelling. And after a few months in America he went to the South Seas.

[1] *The Summing Up.*

From his youth, when he read *The Ebb-tide* and *The Wrecker*, he had always wanted to go there. His ill health perhaps made him more susceptible to beauty and when he saw the islands, their hectic beauty ravished him. He was fascinated ; and he was not the only writer who was caught by their lure and found his ideal there. They had inflamed the imagination of Pierre Loti, Stevenson and Joseph Conrad. Keable finds his heaven here :

> Here is peace. Here is beauty as a golden ladder up to the far and unknown heaven of our hope ; here is simple quiet living, boundless wealth a sure reward....But I go. I must have people and self-complacent civilization and London, I suppose. [1]

The same note of yearning for that land is found in Rupert Brooke :

> .....I was going far away from gentleness and beauty and kindness and the smell of the lagoons and the thrills of that dancing and the scarlet of the flamboyants and the white and gold and other flowers.....[2]

He found it too painful to drag himself away from that heaven on earth and it was the same case with Maugham. He had already been disgusted with civilization and was sure that the peace which he wanted could not be found there and now like Keable and Rupert Brooke he had the golden vision. And when he went back he felt as much sorrow as Rupert Brooke or Keable. That note of yearning we find in *The Moon and Sixpence* :

> Tahiti is very far away, and I know that I should never see it again. A chapter of my life was closed, and I felt a little nearer to inevitable death.

The Moon and Sixpence was written more than three years after his visit to Tahiti. In the mean time the War had ended leaving a distasteful memory in Maugham's mind ; and more important still, he had to remain an invalid as a result of tuberculosis for the last two years. It is a well-known fact

[1] *Isle of Dreams.*

[2] *The Collected Poems of Rupert Brooke*, with a Memoir, (2nd edition, 1928' published by Sidgwick and Jackson, Ltd.) p. cxvii.

that invalids, specially those suffering from tuberculosis, develop a very romantic temperament—we owe to this disease the romantic and adventurous books of Stevenson. Perhaps the same thing happened in the case of Maugham. As an invalid he had enough time to ponder over the War, and the contrast that the peaceful scenery of Tahiti offered to it, began to loom very large, and as a result of that we have the exquisite stories, *The Fall of Edward Bernard* and *Rain*, and the novel *The Moon and Sixpence* (all written in 1919).

In *The Moon and Sixpence* Maugham's love of that simple life in Tahiti comes out in spite of the fact that his subject matter compelled him to put a rein on that inclination. His main theme was the character of an inhuman artist and he could not let his attention wander much. But here and there his notion of a happy life is revealed in little pictures. With deep-seated feeling he gives a picture of the life Strickland's son by Ata is living, in contrast to that of his civilized son :

> I saw him with my mind's eye, on the schooner on which he worked, wearing nothing but a pair of dungarees ; and at night, when the boat sailed along easily before a light breeze, and the sailors were gathered on the upper deck, I saw him dance with another lad, dance wildly, to the wheezy music of the concertina. Above was the blue sky, and the stars, and all about the desert of the Pacific Ocean.

In *Rain* he has given a picture of the artificial and arbitrary notions of civilized society gradually killing the happiness of the natives of the islands, who were quite happy in the simple, peaceful life they were leading. The militant Christian missionary Davidson wants to make the natives ' civilized ' and ' virtuous ' according to his idea of virtue. He, and with him, his wife, shudder to think of the natural attire of the natives. Davidson takes severe steps to make the natives wear civilized clothes and to abolish their informal marriages. Maugham imparts the idea that these notions of civilization choke the natural flow of happiness in the natives. But here too, as in *The Moon and Sixpence*, Maugham has

dwelt on that by the way. His object mainly was to depict the bigoted and intolerant missionary Davidson.

In *The Fall of Edward Bernard*, this disgust for the mechanical civilization and fascination for the simple life find their fullest expression. Edward Bernard echoes Maugham's belief in the worthlessness of civilization in no uncertain terms :

> What is the use of all this hustle and this constant striving? I think of Chicago now and I see a dark, grey city all stone—it is like a prison—and a ceaseless turmoil. And what does all that activity amount to? .....When I am old, what have I to look forward to? To hurry from my home in the morning to my office and work hour after hour till night, and then hurry home again, and dine and go to a theatre? .....I want to make more of my life than that.

And " to make more of his life " Edward Bernard has fled from " the sick fatigue, the languid doubt " of civilization just like the scholar gypsy of Matthew Arnold, and just like him,

> Came as most men deem'd to little good.

Success, in the imagination of ordinary men, is the success, of which Bateman has a vision,

> Of the works of the Hunter Motor Traction and Automobile Company growing in size and importance till they covered a hundred acres, and of the millions of motors they would turn out.

Maugham knows that it is not there that happiness lies. He thought, at that time, that it lies in the kind of life Edward Bernard dreams of living :

> I shall build myself a house on my coral island and I shall live there looking after my trees—I shall grow all sorts of things in my garden, and I shall fish. There will be enough work to keep me busy and not enough to make me dull. I shall have my books and Eva, children I hope, and above all the infinite variety of the sea and the sky, the freshness of the dawn and the beauty of the sunset, and the rich maginficence of the night..... When I am an old man I hope that I shall be able to look back on a happy, simple, peaceful life.

We find here in a nutshell Maugham's idea of how to make a beautiful pattern of life.

Maugham in fact has been saying here almost the same thing that Ernest Dawson has preached in his poems, " why run after shadows when the prize is here ?" Maugham has arrived at an idea which is more of the East than of the West. The Hindu sages have always followed the pattern of life that Maugham here pictures. The same idea occurs in Tagore. He also finds a perfect ideal life in simplicity and quiet :

নাইক পথে ঠেলাঠেলি,
নাইক হাটে গোল,
ওরে কবি এইখানে তোর
কুটিরখানি তোল্ !

ফেল্‌রে ধুয়ে পায়ের ধূলো,
নামিয়ে দেরে বোঝা,
বেঁধেনে তোর সেতারখানা
রেখে দে তোর খোঁজা।

পা ছড়িয়ে ব'স্‌রে হেথায়
সারাদিনের শেষে,
তারায়-ভরা আকাশতলে
সব-পেয়েছির দেশে।

— সব পেয়েছির দেশ খেয়া

[A free translation of it will be something like this :

There is no tumult in the street,
No noise in the mart ;
O poet, in this place
Raise your humble hut.

Wash the dirt of your feet
Put down your load,
And tune your *Sitar* ;
Leave further quest on the road.

Sit here at ease
When the day hears the call
Beneath the starry sky,
In the land where ' I have found all. ']

Tagore, with his Eastern mind, has no need of " further quest on the road " ; but Maugham, with his typical restless Western mind, cannot remain satisfied with that ideal life for long. He has, of course, till recently, almost always taken the South Sea islands as his background ; but he has never abandoned himself to the charms of the islands anywhere else. In 1921, in his play *The Circle*, Teddie pictures his home in the Federated Malay States which inflames Elizabeth's imagination and becomes a decisive factor in her problem whether to elope with Teddie or not. In *Mackintosh*, *Red*, *The Pool* and a few other stories he has touched on the attraction of that country. But we feel that the impression of the dazzling beauty of Tahiti is growing fainter and fainter, and from about 1925, the date of the publication of *The Painted Veil*, we see him entirely preoccupied with characters ; he only gives a few business-like touches to create a background but it is so faint that we cannot recognise the land painted in *The Fall of Edward Bernard*. He has become completely free from the fancy that overpowered him when his intellect was softened by romantic imagination.

It is not difficult to guess how this happened. As the impression on his mind became fainter as a result of the flight of time, and also when with the recovery of his health his mind became as vigorous as ever, Maugham gradually returned to his own pessimistic self. With the same disillusioned eyes, with which he rent the painted veil of life in civilized society, Maugham began to look into this dream-land of his. For a short time he had deceived himself by imagining that an ideal atmosphere produces ideal happiness, gives peace to the mind, which he was seeking. When he rends even that veil, he finds that sufferings and miseries reside there as well as in civilized states. He pictures how the fatal attraction of the beauty of the place becomes indirectly responsible for the tragedy of Lawson. " I was all over the place when I first

came out," Lawson says.[1] But after a few years of life there he wants to go back. He cannot do that because his wife, a native of the place and brought up amid the intoxicating beauty of the island, cannot live away from it. And Lawson deteriorates slowly but surely and at last commits suicide. *The Force of Circumstance*, *Before the Party*, *The Outstation* and many other stories deal with tragedies occurring amid the beautiful and peaceful surroundings of the South Sea Islands or the adjacent countries. One particular thing to be noticed is the fact that Maugham has produced many characters, at this stage, who are fed up with the beauty of the country just as he produced once a character like Edward Bernard who is completely wrapped up in the charm of the place. Lawson in *The Pool* wants to leave the place. Neilson in *Red* does the same. Gallagher in *P. & O.* " does not want to see the country or anyone in it " again. Maugham has discovered that beauty too, like love, has its " sad satiety."

Maugham, at this stage, has understood that peace of mind is the greatest thing, that on it depends happiness, and that peace of mind is independent of the surroundings though they may help it. And from now on we find him turning his eyes away from physical beauty and turning them inward. We find him looking for the beauty of the soul.

III

The Beauty of the Soul

The attitude of a man towards life changes as his mind matures. But the phases of its change are not so individualised, so distinct from one another, as to fall into natural water-tight compartments. The phases overlap one another. There are always concurrent ideas in a mind, some getting stronger, some getting weaker and at last vanishing altogether in the

[1] *The Pool*, *The Trembling of a Leaf.*

process of development. In the first stage, in spite of his unsettled mind, Maugham had a strong and clear-cut conviction. But the difficulty begins from the time when he is seeking the means of escape from such a tormenting conviction. Many are the ways open before him; and he tries them, not one at a time, but sometimes looks indecisively at two or three. The division into periods can only be made by taking the idea that is uppermost in his mind at the time under consideration.

Even so long ago as the time when Maugham was obsessed with Tahiti, we find him having a peep into the beauty of a soul. Dirk Stroeve[1] is the picture of a beautiful soul. But he is a buffoon; he has not the serene beauty of the souls Maugham painted later.

In *The Moon and Sixpence* the beautiful soul of Dirk Stroeve occupies only a fraction of the author's mind. His main attention was fixed on something else. But in *The Painted Veil* (1925) we see a distinct change. In it Maugham is entirely occupied with the soul. He pictures the mysterious and strangely beautiful soul of Walter, and more than that he is concerned with the development, the purification and the sublimation of the soul of Kitty.

Maugham, of course, has always held that no man is entirely bad, but he had, before this stage, always kept the balance pretty steady. But from now on he is more and more bringing out the angel in human beings. Ginger Ted, in *The Vessel of Wrath*, is converted into an angel at the end of the story. *The Back of Beyond* has a character in Tom Saffary, who is a more normal Dirk Stroeve, unsuspecting, tender and forgiving. In *Salvatore* we find a character who possesses "the rarest, most precious, and the loveliest of all qualities," namely, goodness.[2] Neil Macadam[3] is another such pure

[1] *The Moon and Sixpence.*
[2] *Salvatore, Cosmopolitians.*
[3] *Neil Macadam, Ah King.*

soul. In Erik Christessen [1] we get a ripe fruit of this stage in Maugham's mind. This tendency culminates in *Sheppey*. In that play, the angel is the hero too. In the short stories already mentioned, the beauty of the soul has been given very little space to develop, though they are heroes. But in *Sheppey* we find a character whose angelic soul fills the whole space. Whether this is due to the " collective unconscious " completely getting the upper hand in Maugham (as R. H. Ward [2] suggests), is a vain speculation. We find that Maugham's search for peace leads him to the inner beauty of the soul and Sheppey is its culminating point.

Maugham has found out that the purity and goodness of the soul produce happiness. Erik Christessen is happy in his ' Kingdom of Heaven, ' which the purity of his soul helps to create in his own mind. Kitty of the last stage, when she is converted into a good and pure soul, finds no dissatisfaction with life. She says to her father :

> .....I have hope and courage. The past is finished ; let the dead bury their dead. It's all uncertain, life and whatever is to come to me, but I enter upon it with a light and buoyant heart.[3]

Even Dirk Stroeve is very happy not only before the tragedy occurs but also after it ; Maugham suggests that he will be happy, living among simple folk and leading a humble life ; his purity of soul will give him peace. Sheppey, like Christessen, has created a ' Kingdom of Heaven ' in his mind. The angelic characters of the short stories are all happy.

[1] *The Narrow Corner* (1932).

[2] "..... here we have the collective unconscious, the spiritual plane from which inspiration arises, manifesting itself much more directly than anywhere else in his writings. The story of Sheppey..... is overtly a story of the spirit. It has not had its spiritual quality obscured by translation through thought symbols and word symbols, it has not become something else, a material reflection of the spiritual, but has remained spiritual throughout its translation from collective unconscious to papers. It has passed through the agents of its expression with remarkable purity." R. H. Ward, *W. Somerset Maugham*.

(It is to be noted that Mr. Ward has used the phrase " collective unconscious, " not in the technical sense in which Dr. Jung has used it, but in a simplified sense.)

[3] *The Painted Veil*.

Ginger Ted [1] had never been happy when he was leading a devil's life ; but he feels a new exultation when he turns a new leaf. In fact Maugham has understood the true sense of the proverb " Virtue is its own reward. " One who has a pure soul and does good to others, has the reward in the happiness that automatically comes to the good. One need not look to a life hereafter for the reward. " You do good because it gives you pleasure. It is the purest form of happiness there is." [2] The angels created before the production of *The Narrow Corner* have all been awarded material happiness ; Dirk Stroeve, Ginger Ted, Tom Saffary, Neil Macadam and others are all happy in their own way, at the end of the story. But it is different with Erik Christessen and Sheppey. Erik commits suicide and Sheppey turns mad and it may lead one to think that Maugham has gone back to the stage of *Of Human Bondage*. But the very fact that these books are not steeped in a very tragic atmosphere, is enough to dispel such a view.

An isolated study of *The Narrow Corner* and *Sheppey* at once makes the reader question himself why, in spite of the sad ends, the atmosphere is not sufficiently gloomy and tragic. For a powerful writer like Maugham, to fail to leave an impress on the reader of the tragic note, to make him feel keenly for the sufferings of such good people, is a little strange. One explanation of course is that Maugham does not produce such a tragic note because he is convinced that those pure souls, fortified with their purity and goodness, do not feel the misery as ordinary people ; and the author does not like to show a thing in a more tragic light than it really is. But perhaps the better explanation lies in the fact that, at this stage, he has found another avenue of escape from pessimism. He has conveniently taken the help of the philosohpy of *Maya* and that helps him to look at the miseries and sufferings of mankind with perfect equanimity.

[1] *Vessel of Wrath, Ah King.*

[2] *The Back of Beyond, Ah King.*

IV

Peace At Last

In his autobiography Maugham remarks that he has gathered one fact from his study of the philosophers, *viz.*, that the philosophers first become convinced of one thing, irrespective of the reasons, and then find out reasons to support the convictions that suit their particular 'humours.' Maugham has hit upon a truth that fits himself like a glove. At the time of writing *Of Human Bondage* he was in a humour to believe in materialism and "the physiological determinism that went with it," [1] but when his restless mind was despairing of finding any lasting avenue of peace—he had already been disillusioned about Tahiti and all that it represents—he came to be in a 'humour' to be influenced by the Hindu philosophy of *Maya*.

It is very difficult to say exactly from when he has been under the influence of this philosophy. Even so far back as in *The Magician* (1908) we have a trace of such an idea. He makes Haddo say :

> What else is the world than a figure ? Life itself is but a symbol. You must be a wise man if you can tell us what is reality.

But apparently Maugham did not mean it seriously. It is still nothing but a charlatan's nonsense. It takes a long time for such a philosophy to get a hold on the materialistic-minded Englishman. In fact we do not see it in a well-formed state till 1932, the year of the publication of *The Narrow Corner*. Here we first see this philosophy mixed up with his attraction for good souls. We have already seen that it helps him to look with equanimity at the tragic end of such good people like Erik Christessen and Sheppey.

[1] *The Summing Up.*

Maugham expresses this philosophy through the mouth of Dr. Saunders. He is another projection of Maugham himself and acts to some extent as his mouthpiece as Philip did at one time. Dr. Saunders tries to console Fred, when he is mad with grief, with the idea that the world is an illusion, echoing the theory of *Maya* in Indian Philosophy :

> The world consists of me and my thoughts and my feelings..... Life is a dream in which I create the objects that come before me. Everything knowable, every object of experience, is an idea in my mind, and without my mind it does not exist. Then there is no possibility and no necessity to postulate anything outside myself. Dream and reality are one. Life is a connected and consistent dream, and when I cease to dream, the world with its beauty, its pain and sorrow, its unimaginable variety, will cease to be.

It is the essence of the Hindu philosophy of *Maya*, "the illusion of the phenomenal world," which Frith [1] finds "to be the only religion that a reasonable man can accept without misgiving." That opinion of Frith is the opinion of Somerset Maugham at this stage. He is in a humour to believe that the world is a dream and he accepts the reasonings offered by the philosophers who held such a view.

When we examine *Theatre*, which was written later at the back of the mocking vein, in which it is written, we find the influence of such a philosophy. From his philosophic height Maugham looks at his characters with the contentment arising out of the thought that the creatures of the real world, on whom he has modelled his creations, are all dream figures. Therefore, he can see things in their comic aspects ; a few touches are given here and there and the incidents which in 1915 would have looked to him pathetic and painful—the miseries arising out of the affairs of the heart—become extremely comic. We cannot doubt that, if Julia [2] had been created at the same time as *Of Human Bondage*, she would have been

[1] *The Narrow Corner.*

[2] *Theatre.*

made a tragic figure with her passion for Tom, and her mortification at her lover's coldness and unfaithfulness would have been as feelingly painted as that of Philip. But the time has changed and now Maugham, fortified with his new philosophy, is not touched in the same way by human suffering as before; what is touched in him now by it, is his sense of humour. Apparently Maugham has got at last what he wanted —peace and contentment.

V

The Yearning for the Faith Lost

One expects, from a man who is convinced that the world is a dream of one's own creation, a certain ironical smile at the faith of those who believe in God and the Hereafter. We could have expected Maugham to make the nuns in the convent,[1] who believe in God and a reward after death, ridiculous. He mocks their ceremonies—we can feel that—but that is all. Why is it so? A bit of conversation between Kitty and Waddington gives the answer. Kitty says :

> Supposing there is no life everlasting? Think what it means if death is really the end of all things. They have given up all for nothing. They have been cheated. They're dupes.

Waddington, after some reflection, answers :

> I wonder. I wonder if it matters that what they have aimed at is illusion. Their lives are in themselves beautiful. I have an idea that the only thing which makes it possible to regard this world we live in without disgust, is the beauty which now and then men create out of the chaos. The pictures they paint, the music they compose, the books they write, and the lives they lead. Of all these the richest in beauty is the beautiful life that is the perfect work of art.

[1] *The Painted Veil.*

Maugham has found that these nuns, guided by undisturbed faith, have succeeded in making a beautiful pattern in life for which he has been seeking. These nuns, he has found, have one advantage over him ; their faith makes it easier for them to get that happiness, whereas it is difficult (and we shall see later that it has been impossible) for Maugham to attain that through the intellect. It may be objected that, at the time of writing this book, Maugham had not come under the influence of the *Maya* philosophy and that is why he looks with admiration and with a yearning in his heart for that faith which can give peace and happiness ; or in other words, that this yearning is a temporary one and must have vanished with his growing conviction that the world is a dream. If it be so, then why does he picture Ginger Ted [1] feeling happy when he has that faith ? Ginger is happy to find that " there is something in it (Christianity) after all "—and *The Vessel of Wrath* was written in 1930. Even if that is too early for him to have come under the influence of the *Maya* philosophy, what about *Sheppey* (1933) ? At least *Sheppey* was produced after his conviction of the world's unreality. That drama, we feel, was written with the same yearning in his heart of hearts for the faith, which we saw first in *The Painted Veil* ; Sheppey feels exultation when he comes to feel in his heart like a true Christian with an immense faith.

This yearning for faith does not mean that he yearns for the faith in Christianity—the illustrations given above may lead to such a mistaken idea. It is not that. Maugham yearns for any faith that gives one happiness. He yearns for the faith which the Jap diver in *The Narrow Corner* feels :

> For the Jap, lying there, dying there painlessly, it was not the end but the turning over a page ; he knew that.....he was slipping from one life to another. *Karma*, the deeds of this as of other lives he had passed, would be somehow continued ; and perhaps, in his exhaustion, the only motion that remained to him was curiosity ; anxious he might be or amused, to know in what condition he would be reborn.

[1] *The Vessel of Wrath.*

The Jap believing in *Karma* dies with equanimity. He knows that " somehow his life will be continued " ; it would have saved Maugham much unhappiness if only he could have such a faith. Maugham knows that. When we probe deeper into the cause of such yearning, we cannot but come to a rather unhappy conclusion.

VI

The Final Stage

The last section naturally leads us to the question, " Why does Maugham yearn after faith, even though he has attained the peace of mind through his philosophy ?" It arouses one suspicion in our minds, that this philosophic calm is also a passing phase like the other phases we have examined —at least it makes us doubt the firmness of Maugham's faith in his philosophy.

Maugham belongs to the race of men which produced a Dr. Johnson who asked people to hit their heads on the wall to convince themselves of the reality of this world, and it is difficult for a man belonging to such a race of practical men to believe in a philosophy like that of *Maya*. The advocates of that philosophy, moreover, had at least faith in one thing —in one Absolute, in relation to which all other things are unreal. But Maugham having no faith in the essential basis of that philosophy, namely, the Absolute, has his ground cut away from beneath him.[1] He tried to make a practical use of that plilosophy, and naturally this self-hypnotism could not be carried very far. He cannot, with his whole soul, take such a philosophy as the truth. " If life is too painful one must have the courage to leave the world," he says at one place[2] ; such an advice cannot come from a man who

[1] One suspects that the smattering of that philosophy was acquired from a study of *Outlines of Hindu Philosophy* by Srinivasa Iyengar, mentioned in *The Narrow Corner*.

[2] *The Summing Up*.

takes pain as only part of a fiction created by one's own mind in conjunction with the senses, without which that suffering does not exist.

Every school of philosophy takes something as given, as fundamental axiomatic truth; but the difficulty with Maugham is that he cannot swallow that "given" quantity. Nothing, therefore, satisfies him. He set to build up a consistent and reasonable philosophy of his own. "I knew very well," he says, "that I had no gift for metaphysical speculation. I meant to take from here and there theories that satisfied not only my mind, but what I could not but think more important than my mind, the whole body of my instincts, feelings and deep-rooted prejudices, the prejudices that are so intimate a part of one that they can hardly be distinguished from instincts; and out of them make a system that would be valid for me and enable me to pursue the course of my life."[1] And the part of *Maya* philosophy which regards the world as a personal illusion came in very handy to build up the philosophy suited to his mind. But one fears that it has only become a mental pose with Maugham. It has not cured him completely of his inborn restlessness; he still has a yearning for the peace which other people get through faith; we could not have found that trace of envy and regret if he were himself happy and completely at peace with the world.

But the first impression that his latest novels impart to the reader is, however, that of peace and contentment. He seems apparently to have managed to escape from the tormenting thoughts that have so long pursued him. What he has done really is that he has averted his eyes from human sufferings. This *Maya* philosophy seems to have done one thing at least; he may not believe in that philosophy but there is no doubt that it has shaken his belief in the reality of the sufferings which he sees around him. And it will not

[1] *The Summing Up.*

be perhaps too far-fetched, if we suspect that the real condition of his mind is a state of happy blankness arising out of exhaustion. He does not like to think of that problem any more; he likes to cling to the philosophy of illusion as long as he can :

" You've lost heart, hope, faith and awe. What in God's name have got left ?" asks Fred Blake. " Resignation," answers Dr. Saunders.[1]

Maugham has attained that resignation—perhaps out of despair—yet, for practical purposes, it serves as well as any other kind of resignation; it has given him peace. But the question which naturally comes to our mind, when we find the signs of his intellectual restlessness, is " How long is this resignation to last ?"

VII

A Formula for Happiness

Somerset Maugham belongs to a race of practical men and we have seen that this fact is the cause of his weak faith in the philosophy of *Maya*. And yet we have seen that such a philosophy has given him some peace; it has helped him to condition his mind to the sufferings of people, from the pain of which he has averted his eyes but the humour of which he can quite perceive. From the practical point of view he has escaped from the pessimism which has so long tormented him.

He has attained peace of mind but being a practical man he knows that ordinary people cannot attain that in the way he has done; they cannot be happy by seeing good souls happy, neither can they swallow the idea that the world is a piece of unreality. To actors on this world's stage, the world with its sufferings, disappointments and miseries is a hard piece of reality. For them, Maugham has shown some practical ways of mitigating their sufferings. He has not sermonised. He has only suggested some practical methods.

[1] *The Narrow Corner.*

It did not take him long to come to the conclusion that " nature is hostile." Man must suffer; that cannot be helped. But Maugham has found out that there is such a thing as self-inflicted suffering and this he tries to point out to his foolish fellow creatures. He, unlike Chekov, is not preoccupied with the hostile ways of a Superior Force but is more concerned with the ways of men.

" Is it not pitiful that men, tarrying so short a space in a world where there is so much pain, should thus torture themselves ?" [1] He has found out that " with a certain humour and good deal of horse-sense one can make a fairly good job of what is after all a matter of small consequence." [2] Maugham finds that men who should be expected to take up this attitude of making the best of a bad bargain, fail to use that " horse-sense " and only find some means to torture themselves.

He set himself to find out those essentially artificial and worthless notion, the conventions and fixed ideas in which men have steeped themselves and without which they could have been much happier. One of such notions is religion. In *Rain* Maugham has pointed out how far such religious mania can go ; Davidson, the missionary, by his religious zeal, and an entirely misdirected zeal at that, manages to rob the simple natives of their joy of living a care-free life.

There are other more contemptible attitudes for which Maugham cannot but feel some disgust. Men have formed some notions about gentlemanliness which are, as Maugham shows, absolutely ludicrous. Mr. Wurburton in *The Outstation* insists on dressing properly even when he dines alone. Mr. Gruyter in *The Vessel of Wrath* dines with more relish though he does not follow Mr. Wurburton's idea of gentle breeding. This kind of snobbishness, however, is quite harmless ; but Maugham knows how far this can go. He shows

[1] Kitty, *The Painted Veil.*

[2] Dr. Saunders, *The Narrow Corner.*

that in *The Alien Corn* where the struggle between George's tendency to live in natural manner and his father's idea of behaving like an " English Gentlemen " leads to much unhappiness and ultimately to George's suicide.

With these worthless ideas, the fruits of a civilization going the wrong way, Maugham has no patience. He expresses the same thing as Oscar Wilde's Hester Worsley does in *A Woman of No Importance* :

> You shut out of your society the gentle and the good. You laugh at the simple and the pure.....You have lost life's secret.

Maugham suggests that to be happy one needs to find out this ' life's secret.' And every thinking man cannot but agree with Maugham in this respect. But it is difficult to swallow Maugham's conclusion about love and the efficacy of fidelity.

He has found out from his own experience how much pain passion can bring to human beings. He passes over that lightly in *The Summing Up* where he speaks of " a young attractive person " for whom he had to scrape up as much money as he could lay hands on ; he had to stoop to writing pot-boilers even. He makes Philip [1] pass through a similar experience in his love for Mildred ; the poignancy of that is so successfully conveyed to the reader that it leaves one in no doubt of its personal character. He shows the disaster which passion brings in innumerable places. Blanche Stroeve commits suicide when Strickland leaves her. [2] Kitty and Walter in *The Painted Veil* are consumed with its fire, Chandralal in the short story *Giulia Lazzari* [3] has to give up his comfortable refuge and commits suicide because he cannot check his love for Giulia Lazzari. Mrs. Crosbie in *The Letter* [4] murders her lover when she finds him cold and unfaithful. In *Neil Macadam* Darya's passion for Neil results in her losing her

[1] *Of Human Bondage.*
[2] *The Moon and Sixpence.*
[3] *Ashenden.*
[4] *Altogether.*

life in the jungle. Maugham pictures how ugly passion can become, in *The Narrow Corner*, where Mrs. Hudson's passionate attachment to Fred Blake makes her plot with devilish cunning the murder of her husband by Fred. These are only a few of the most outstanding instances. Maugham has shown even in his first novel the doings of love, " the dirty trick nature has played upon man " [1]; and we rarely get any novel or short story or play written by him in which we do not find some trace or other of the pain caused by love. Maugham, however, knows from personal experience that in this matter men and women cannot help themselves; he feels sympathy for the characters who are in love's throes. But he knows, from personal experience again, that this consuming passion does not last. " When you fall in love at twenty you think your love will last for ever, but at fifty you know so much, about life and about love, and you know that it will last so short a time," says Mr. Hamlyn.[2] Roger in *Theatre* finds that " love is not worth all the fuss they make about it." Maugham therefore gives the advice to take it easy. He advocates the policy of taking love as a pleasant thing, like an article of luxury to spice our life, and not too seriously. After all nothing really matters in this world of make-believe. Mrs. Nesbit in *Of Human Bondage* is the first product, though an immature one, of such a view. The mature products are Rosie Driffield in *Cakes and Ale* (1930) and Julia in *Theatre* (1937). To Rosie friends mean lovers. The narrator once feels the pain of jealousy on account of her other lovers.

" What harm does it to you ? Don't I give you a good time ! Aren't you happy when you are with me ? " Rosie asks.

" Awfully, " he answers.

" Well then. It's so silly to be fussy and jealous. Why not be happy with what you can get ? Enjoy yourself while you have the chance,

[1] *The Summing Up.*

[2] *P. & O., Altogether.*

I say; we shall be dead in a hundred years and what will anything matter then? Let's have a good time while we can."

And Ashenden understands that there is no use inviting pain. Rosie may be mistaken for a street woman and Ashenden's defence of that 'sweet' woman, as he calls her, is a bit hard to accept, but it is quite consistent with Maugham's opinion as to the way of making life comfortable. Ashenden, the narrator, says :

> She was a simple woman. Her instincts were healthy and ingenuous. She loved to make people happy. She loved love.....She was naturally affectionate. When she liked anyone it was quite natural for her to go to bed with him. She never thought twice about it. It was not vice; it was not lasciviousness; it was her nature. She gave herself as naturally as the Sun gives heat or the flowers their perfume. It had no effect on her character; she remained sincere, unspoiled and artless.[1]

Maugham in fact condemns passion but wisely enough supports instinct, which can only make life pleasant and does not make it burdensome as passionate love does. Luise Frith in *The Narrow Corner* does not suffer very much when Fred leaves her because in her case it is instinct and not passionate love as Dr. Saunders shrewdly guesses. Julia in *Theatre* heaves a sigh of relief and laughs over the whole affair when she manages to escape from her passion for Tom. We may say that Maugham approves (unlike Aldous Huxley) the state of love in the world which Huxley paints satirically in *Brave New World.*

Maugham is not blind to the fact that in a case of love, sometimes not only is unhappiness caused to the lovers by their own passion, but more pain is added to their lot by other people, who also suffer because they have not tolerance. "A little tolerance, a little good humour and you do not know how comfortable you can make yourself on this planet."[2] People indeed do not know how much comfort can tolerance

[1] *Cakes and Ale.*

[2] Dr. Saunders, *The Narrow Corner.*

bring. Dirk Stroeve in *The Moon and Sixpence* knows the value of tolerance; he wants to take his wife back if she consents. But Dirk Stroeve is much above ordinary men. Most people are of the opposite nature; normal men are like Mr. Crosbie of *The Letter*, most women are like Doris of *The Force of Circumstance*—they cannot take the past infidelity of their mates in a tolerant spirit. Maugham shows that if they could—and it would have been possible if they had not in their minds the fixed idea about some arbitrary rules of conduct, summed up in the word " virtue "—they would have had happiness. Mr. Crosbie certainly could not have found any further complaint to make against his wife if he only could take a lenient attitude towards her past attachment to Geoffrey Hammond. Doris would have found in Guy a perfectly faithful husband if she could only bring herself to sympathise with the fear of loneliness that had driven her husband to live with another woman, a native of the place. Indeed a little tolerance on the part of those who thought themselves the 'injured' parties, according to the notions of civilized society, would have saved them much suffering. As Maugham remarks in *The Alien Corn*, " It is strange that men, inhabitants for so short a while of an alien and inhuman world, should go out of the way to cause themselves so much unhappiness." George Moon in *The Back of Beyond* advises Tom Saffary to take a tolerant view of his wife's love affair with Knobby; he was dead and there was no possibility of that to recur again. Tom takes Moon's advice to take his wife back and we are left in no doubt about the fact that their future life is going to be peaceful. In *P. & O.*, Mrs. Hamlyn comes to forgive her husband and is ready to take him back. Maugham does not hesitate to push his view to its logical conclusion. Peaceful happiness is his aim; for that he condemns people who cannot take a tolerant view; he even implies that for the sake of happiness one should have no scruple in becoming less virtuous—in this world of make-believe a little lying or concealment of so-called

sin, for the good cause of peace, does not do any harm when very likely the contrary attitude may shatter some happy life. As the narrator says in *Virtue* :

> Virtue be damned. A virtue that only causes havoc and unhappiness is worth nothing.

If Margery in that story had been less virtuous and had a secret affair with Morton, it would have passed like a passing fancy and the happy household would not have been broken. But she remains virtuous and reveals to her husband the state of affairs, which results in an unbearable mental suffering for her husband who is passionately in love with her, till at last he is driven to commit suicide.[1] Maugham has made the Eternal say in *The Judgment Seat*[2] :

> I have often wondered why men think I attach so much importance to sexual irregularity. If they read my works more attentively they would see that I have always been sympathetic to that particular form of human frailty.

By 1930 Maugham has become quite definite in his attitude towards what is known as virtue and towards sexual infidelity. The story *Virtue*[3] was written about 1929, *The Back of Beyond*[4] in the same period ; so also was *The Vessel of Wrath.*[5] In the last-mentioned story he paints a picture of tolerance in Miss Jones who feels no scruple in her mind to marry a reformed reprobate and as such she offers a contrast to Doris of *The Force of Circumstance*, who cannot forgive her husband though he is a saint in comparison to Ginger Ted. In *Cakes and Ale* (1930) Maugham very clearly points out the greater efficacy of tolerance. Edward Driffield knows all along that his wife is deceiving him ; but he does not care ; he knows with Ashenden that Rosie is " like a clear deep pool in the forest glade into which it's heavenly to plunge, but it

[1] *Virtue, First Person Singular.*
[2] *Cosmopolitans.*
[3] *First Person Singular.*
[4] *Ah King.*
[5] *Ibid.*

is neither less cool nor less crystalline because a tramp and a gypsy and a gamekeeper have plunged into it before you." He is not jealous because he is very happy with Rosie and he does not mind if other people also partake of that happiness ; that does not lessen his. He becomes almost mad with grief when Rosie leaves him.

Whether or not we agree with his unconventional conclusion about love and sexual fidelity, matters little. What matters is, that he has given a possible solution of marital troubles. At present it is of course almost an impracticable one. The wisdom of Edward Driffield is not a common one. Still we can see signs (in revolutionised Russia for example) to prove that Maugham's conclusions are not exactly insane ones. Whether they are immoral or whether there can be as much happiness as Maugham thinks is bound to be, if the world comes to take that view, is difficult to guess. But it must be pointed out that Maugham does not exactly say that one can get more happiness by following his advice than in passionate love and fidelity ; what he says is, that there are less chances of unhappiness if people can condition their minds to think like him.

He arrived at such conclusions with one thing in view, *viz.*, how to be happy, and his doctrine, in the main, resembles the doctrine " Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow you die." Rosie says the same thing when she advises Ashenden to take whatever pleasure comes in his way, for " we shall all be dead in a hundred years."

" I who thought I could never be in love again, of course it can't last. Why shouldn't I get what fun out of it I can ?, " says Julia in *Theatre*.

This essentially Hedonistic attitude has been exhibited over and over again by many characters in Maugham's works but there is a subtle difference between Maugham's attitude and

that of the Hedonists. The Hedonists [1] advocated the philosophy of taking whatever joy comes in one's way, but Maugham modifies it with his racial prudence. He knows that wine does not give happiness, neither can it give forgetfulness for which the Hedonists like it; it cannot give the peace of mind he is seeking. Charles in *Virtue* takes the help of wine to forget his miseries but Maugham shows that this cannot be done. Maugham does not like that momentary happiness which is followed by intense pain. That is why he condemns love, as it is understood. Love, he knows, is able to give intense happiness but there is always the risk of an unbearable pain with it. He has shown how love gives heavenly bliss to Liza, Bertha Craddock, Philip Carey, and innumerable other characters, but he has shown, in greater relief, what unbearable pain it may bring. "It is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all," says Tennyson; to Maugham it is mere foolishness. It is not worth the trouble of taking the risk of so much pain. He likes happiness enough and wherever he can find it, but he prefers to go without that happiness if it has much pain glued to it. In fact he is a Hedonist but a sane and discriminating Hedonist.

[1] *e.g., Aristippus and his Followers, The Cyranaics.*

CHAPTER VIII

The Summing Up

It is a far cry from *Liza of Lambeth* to *Theatre* and the author may well look back with a sigh of satisfaction. It has been said of Conrad that " he seems to have sprung just as Minerva sprang, straight from Jove's head full armed and full equipped " ; this cannot be said of Maugham—in his case it has been a gradual development.

When Maugham wrote his first novel he was hailed as a rising star, but he had yet to find himself ; he was not yet a master of creative art. After reading *Liza of Lambeth* Arthur Jones remarked to a friend of his that the author should become a successful dramatist [1] and the author too for a time thought that his talent was in the way of play writing. *Liza of Lambeth* is an immature production ; it, however, reveals the author's keen power of observation. The next four of five novels are mere experiments, some in form as, say, *The Merry-go-round*, and some in subject matter as *The Making of a Saint*. Maugham was not yet seriously thinking of becoming a novelist ; he was trying his best to be a successful dramatist. Still in some way or other these novels show his development.

At the time of writing *Liza of Lambeth* he did not know his limitations and defects. He had later the criticism of his first novel to guide him and he certainly profited by that. Maugham's second experiment, *The Making of a Saint*, deserves no more attention than a passing mention as an experiment in the historical novel. But the next two novels, *Mrs. Craddock* and *The Hero*, deserve more attention as showing distinct advance. In *Liza of Lambeth* no doubt we have a story, but it is more of a photograph of the life of the slums than a story.

[1] Mentioned in *The Summing Up*.

There is really very little of the conflict which we see in Maugham's later novels. That we get in *Mrs. Craddock* and *The Hero*. In *Mrs. Craddock* we have a theme, Bertha Craddock's passion for Edward and the disillusioned love turning her into a shrew. The same thing can be said of *The Hero*. From that point of view Maugham has made a distinct advance towards finding himself. It is nothing but vain pedagogy to try to judge between merits of a photographic realist (as Maugham in his first novel was) and that of a master in the art of story-telling (which Maugham became in his subsequent works). There is no use going into the question whether the capacity for story-telling is greater than the talent of a photographic artist or just the opposite. What is meant here by 'advance' is that Maugham, while trying to find where his particular talent lies, has found something. If he had remained a slum novelist or rather the crass realist of his early days, he might have made improvements on his photographic talents seen in *Liza of Lambeth* but his real talent lay elsewhere, where his capacity for photographic realism is an asset as a subordinate factor but not as a principal.

The two books mentioned show an advance no doubt but they fare badly indeed in comparison with Maugham's mature works; they are not written in the well-knit manner which we identify with Maugham; there is much that would have been better to leave out as unnecessary. And the same can be said of the next four novels, *The Explorer*, *The Merry-go-round*, *The Bishop's Apron* and *The Magician*. One cannot but agree with Mr. Ward, when he says that after *Mrs. Craddock* and *The Hero* "the progress of Somerset Maugham as a novelist suffers a check and does not reappear until 1915, more than a dozen years later[1]": indeed the four novels written in between are nothing but pot-boilers. *The Merry-go-round* has at least one merit that it is an experiment in form but that

[1] R. H. Ward, *W. Somerset Maugham*.

cannot be said of the other three, specially *The Magician*. In the last-mentioned book Maugham deliberately catered to the vulgar taste for sensationalism; he wanted money, to put it crudely, and he made it. He committed what is called by Mr. Ward " a dishonest mistake " and " a sin against inspiration." At the end of 1908 we find Maugham no better than a writer of pot-boilers.

For six years after that, Somerset Maugham disappeared as a novelist. His plays were bringing him fame and money but his real genius lay concealed. Apparently this period was barren as far as novels are concerned, but it was not so. Something was troubling him; the memories of his past life were making him restless and, as he tells us in his autobiography, he felt that he had to put them on paper or he would have no peace of mind, and he did; the result was a crude form of *Of Human Bondage*. This was nothing but inspiration. So long his novels were lacking that essential factor; their faults seem so glaring because they were written uninspired; *Of Human Bondage* is Maugham's first inspired novel. But when first this inspiration came, Maugham was unable to utilise it; his sporadic attempts at writing novels had not made him such a master of the art as to enable him to do justice to such an inspiration. No wonder his first attempt was crude; and he rewrote it in 1915 and has given us the monumental work *Of Human Bondage*.

Of Human Bondage was written under the spell of an inspiration and naturally it has recorded in full the working of the author's mind with its cravings and passions, as none of the books preceding it had done; it reveals the pessimistic state of Maugham's mind which was destined to undergo many transformations with maturity. With this book really Maugham's career as a novelist begins. He finds out what he is capable of and gradually after a few experiments perfects his material and style. In *Of Human Bondage* we find him blessed with inspiration but the mechanical dexterity comes

later. His next novel, *The Moon and Sixpence*, is an experiment in form which he perfects later on. There he gives the impression of being at home; there is a certain sense of freedom of movement, fluidity which we do not see even in *Of Human Bondage*. Moreover, in this book he makes a successful experiment with time-shift and the first person singular. Two other things we notice in this book. Firstly, Maugham's fascination for simple life amid beautiful surroundings which develops into the somewhat Utopian conception of an ideal life in the short story, *The Fall of Edward Bernard*; secondly the opening of Maugham's eyes to the possibility of the infinite beauty of soul, the first fruit of which we get in the character of Dirk Stroeve in this book and which matures later in characters like Erik Christessen and Sheppey. In this book we have the first indication that the pessimistic attitude of Maugham—his feeling about a cruel and callous Superior Force ruling man's life—has given place to an attitude of acceptance and tolerance; from now he tries to find out the means to make the best of a bad bargain.

His next novel, *The Painted Veil*, shows him a master of his art. The technical devices he has perfected and in the well-knit story we never get the impression of the chapter being disjointed episodes somehow linked together, as we get to a certain extent in *The Moon and Sixpence*. In the latter book the story interest in places slackens due to the insertion of too much of the narrator's opinions in the style of a biographer. This never happens again. Even in *The Cakes and Ale* where we get such personal comments to a perceptible extent, the fascinating style of the author prevents that from being exasperating; but in *The Moon and Sixpence* the author is not yet so fascinating; he is not yet so much at ease with this form of literary art which he has so recently taken up seriously.

Mr. R. H. Ward remarks, "The importance of *The Painted Veil*, otherwise a not very important book, lies in this

at it is the first instance of Mr. Maugham openly showing nself on the side of the angels." [1] This is only half truth ; e real importance lies in its first showing that Maugham at last the master of his art. It no doubt shows one stage the development of the author's mind, *viz.*, his fascination the beauty of the soul, but this is only a small factor. It ly affected the nature of his character drawing. The it of a novelist's philosophy or the peculiarity of his ideas not the greatest consideration in judging his art. It is impression of throbbing life that matters ; and there are things that blend together to give that impression, the pple in the novel and the form or suitability of construction. character drawing Maugham had long ago proved himself be a master, but the other factor he had not mastered fore. It was not unnatural ; Aristotle noticed long ago that beginners succeed earlier with the Diction and Characters an with the construction of a story," and what he said of one m of literary art is applicable to novels and short stories).

Once a master of the form and technique, Maugham ver loses his mastery as all his later novels prove ; they ow the mastery of the greatest art, the art of concealing the rtifices. Not only does he progress from the point of view f technique but from *Of Human Bondage* to *Theatre*, his atest [2] novel, we find his mind maturing, his views getting rystallised, his rebelling intellect gradually becoming conciled to life which he had hitherto felt to be a hopeless uddle. And in his last novel he is so successful in detaching mind from the sufferings of people that he can see fun in at is tragic to us. Side by side with this change of attitude wards life we find a subtle change in the world of Somerset augham. When he has liberated himself from the obsession,

[1] R. H. Ward, *W. Somerset Maugham*.

[2] Not considering *Christmas Holiday* which was published after this thesis written.

the idea of a cruel fate ruling human life irrationally, he ha time to enjoy what is good in this world. He seeks refug in the good and the beautiful to shake off the rebellious though that have only made him miserable. For a time he is attracte by a sort of materialised Utopia in Tahiti. Then he seeks something more permanent and finds that men with pur souls are the only beings that are happy. They are mor sure of happiness than people living in a paradise on ear That paradise on earth may be shattered but the real paradis in soul is beyond the reach of the miseries and sufferings of everyday life. This mature conception explains the interes he takes in the angelic characters which we find in most o the novels written between 1919 and 1933 and many of th short stories and plays of the period. He has not yet beer able to look at life in a detached manner. He still feels strongl for suffering humanity and the angelic characters only give him some consolation that some people at least are happy in spite of cruel destiny or rather it is possible to be happy even on this earth. In *Theatre*, however, it seems that he has at last been able to force himself into detachment and, just as to Bergson, even tragedy appears to him comic. Naturally he, to whom the whole of life appears to be a long laugh, needs no stimulating thought of the beauty of the souls to keep his spirits up now. It is indeed rather fascinating to follow the intricate and subtle turnings of the mind of Somerset Maugham, concealed under the " skilful and unbridled art " [1] of one of the greatest story-tellers of modern times.

Whether Maugham has yet to write his masterpiece or not, is a vain speculation, but it is certain that he is yet to reach the zenith of his reputation. His reading public i not exactly the reading public of, say, Jane Austen. " When I take up one of Jane Austen's books such as *Pride and Prejudice*," says Mark Twain, " I feel like a bar-keeper enterin

[1] Anatole France, *Life and Letters*.

the kingdom of heaven." [1] With those who seek such edifying atmosphere Maugham has no chance; but those who want to find how complex is human character, how infinite its varieties, will find what they seek in the throbbing life depicted in Maugham's books.

[1] Quoted in *The Fiction and the Reading Public*, by Q. D. Leavis.

APPENDIX

A CHRONOLOGICAL LIST OF THE NOVELS BY WILLIAM SOMERSET MAUGHAM WITH THEIR DATES OF PUBLICATION

Liza of Lambeth. 1897. A novel.
The Making of a Saint. 1898. A novel.
Orientations. 1899. Short stories.
The Hero. 1901. A novel.
Mrs. Craddock. 1902. A novel.
The Merry-go-round. 1904. A novel.
The Bishop's Apron. 1906. A novel.
The Explorer. 1907. A novel.
The Magician. 1908. A novel.
Of Human Bondage. 1915. A novel.
The Moon and Sixpence. 1919. A novel.
The Trembling of a Leaf. 1921. Short stories.
The Painted Veil. 1925. A novel.
The Casuarina Tree. 1926. A novel.
Ashenden, or The British Agent. 1928. Three stories.
Cakes and Ale, or The Skeleton in the Cupboard. 1930. A novel.
First Person Singular. 1931. Short stories.
Altogether. 1931. Short stories.
The Narrow Corner. 1932. A novel.
Ah King. 1933. Short stories.
Cosmopolitans. 1936. Short stories.
Theatre. 1937. A novel.
Christmas Holiday. 1939. A novel.